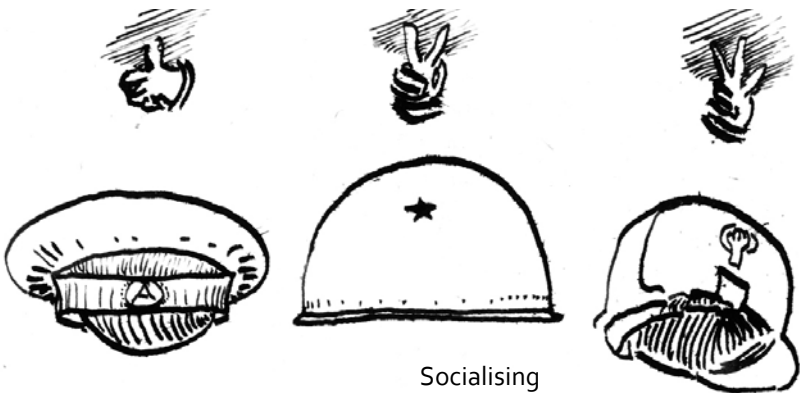


# Revolutionary collectives

Martin Krämer Liehn

Nº 5





## Socialising beyond our strategic aim

The possibility to end class war develops far from its battle-grounds. A class-based society is submerged in battles. How can we open up spaces to develop those indefinitely fine and delicate human faculties essential to classless co-operation? Art, war, writing, growing turnips and going to sea are the outcome of social relations. Bourgeois idealism has made much fuss about the revolutionary hero. May god help those who need heroes, or heroines! In reality, we need no god, no fatherland, no fatherhood – neither with female traits, nor phantom individuality.

We need collectives able to strike back against the atrocities of global class war waged from above against the oppressed. By definition, revolutionary collectives bear the seed of class-free society inside of them. Yet, from the outside, they may look like rotten apples or worse. When we ultimately find them, they can be quite insulting to our memories of them flowering, spring recollections we fancied and used to associate to their name: lesbian and gay pride, industrial action, autonomous agreement, workers' councils, cosmopolitan communism, guerilla advances. But to understand the whole potential of their intrinsic faculties and external failures, we have to consider more than just

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welcome, please direct them to:  
Fundacja Książka i Prasa - kip  
ul. Twarda 60  
PL-00-143 Warszawa/Pologne  
tel./fax: +48 – 22 – 625 36 26  
kip@medianet.pl  
international bank account № :  
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memories of their fragrance in springtime. Indeed, we are well-advised to study forms in development which have preceded what we understand to need now.

Making history, we use all our senses to undo the modesty of individual understanding and agency. How much can we learn socially under the impression of being overwhelmed? Feeling overwhelmed, as the Lenin mausoleum instructs us aesthetically, means a very limiting experience from the battleground, hopefully the one of class war.

Instead, we can de-militarise human relations radically. As we will see, even some early Bolsheviks managed to do so, among close comrades at least. Quite characteristically, revolutionary collectives tend to downsize classist attitudes, sexist advantages, racist bias, and ageist arrangements to an extent unheard of in conservative societies. They simply have to. You can wage class war from above with listless soldiers held together by their payroll and authoritarian deals. Instead, on our side of the barricade, you have to learn to move among the oppressed like a fish in water, understand their strategic choices, and interpret their varying speeds of mobilisation to a positive effect.

In the records of global social

revolution, we find collectives merging their productive and reproductive capacities, leisure and front-line solidarity, empathy, sound meals and hilarious creativity. To single out issues and contexts really worth fighting for, we need to practice daily, enlarging our understanding of social dynamics beyond the limits set by personal socialisation. Self-education towards genuine collective responsibility requires a life-time, really. To make things even more difficult, the ongoing class war waged from above grants us but a fragmented row of splendid and brief instances for living up to genuine collective action.

Nevertheless, regaining the initiative, we might well be in the role again to reshape life on the ruins of capitalism. Then, we will need social faculties which the battlegrounds of our lifetime had simply not in store for us. That may be one reason why in some instances it makes sense to read, debate and dream collectively - even about our past. So, take a leap back through time and space with us to see how comrades elsewhere have experimented with radical ways of life.

#### Cross questioning

*-What are your plans?*

-I would like to tell you some stories which regularly cause me



sleepless nights since I set out to understand them.

*-Is that your job?*

-No, I have decided to leave academic reproduction. I dream about contributing to the real conversion for social revolution in the years to come.

*-And if you fail?*

-Individual failure is a bourgeois category.

*-Up to now, proletarians of the new world order do not exhibit a very active interest in learning any lessons from past revolutionary collectives.*

-Our social experience is quite right to refuse lessons. They might turn out to be just another brick in the wall. Instead, I try to discuss judgements here which are simply meaningless unless they are shared. They have evolved slowly in the course of militant investigation over half a decade following the breakthrough at Cancún.

*-Militant investigation? You just appealed to us to de-militarise.*

-Our relations, not our investigation into the records of our enemies.

*-Who's your enemy, then?*

-We find out in the course of joint investigation.

*-And your work?*

-Changing my views to understand Russian, Czech and Cuban comrades.

*-What have you seen up to now?*

-About 100 pages of rare reading in Czech, 1000 in Cuba and some 10,000s in the former Soviet Union.

*-What could you distil from such a biased reading then?*

-I have assembled some notes on four different stories. Each one tries out a different approach. It's up to you to find the one most suiting your own social experience. From there, the other stories might become more accessible, because all of them are deeply entangled – a collective of stories if you want. The first one tells about a group of friends – a gay commune of Moscow communists.

*-Sounds funky, and then?*

-About a giant industrial workers' collective a night's train-ride south of Moscow.

*-Sounds rather 1970s: Revolution in the factories - fury in the slaughterhouse?*

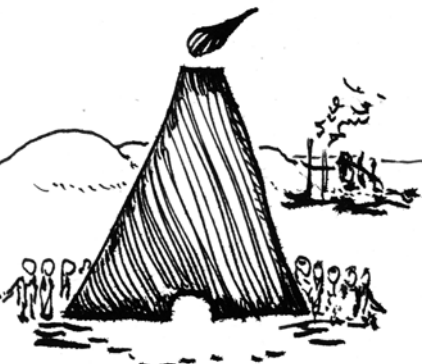
-It's a part of the global South, that's what gave us the over-weight in Seattle 1999, Cancún 2003.

*-So what do you want to tell us besides encompassing the global southern periphery?*

- About a whole landscape of anti-Capitalist industrial experience: Bohemian communists, Moravian Marxists, Upper Silesian factory committees

*- Listening to Dvoržák I get the impression that Czech music has been reinvented in America for America.*

- It's precisely in Latin America where Socialism is currently being reinvented and made a pan-continental project again. That's why I try to open the Cuban Kaleidoscope to end our book...



*-From personal life to global strife?*

*-For our purposes global means more: personal issues, giant collectives, landscapes and listening altogether.*

*-Hand out your instructions for our better future, then!*

*-If there is any chance to relate them with yours, with pleasure.*

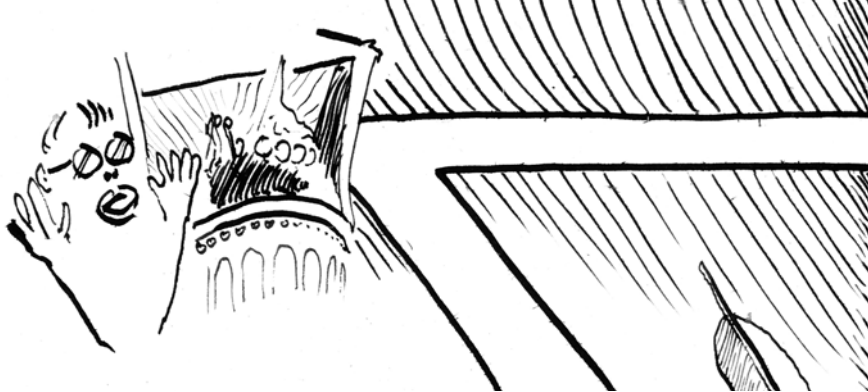
Wolle<sup>c21</sup>, Wolf<sup>c5</sup> and Waibel<sup>c6-8</sup> start a commune in the heart of world revolution, Moscow 1924

Back in Germany, they would have been on death row for making revolution a reality. From November 1918 to their aborted uprising in October 1923, communists, anarcho-syndicalists and militant socialists had sustained something close to permanent revolution in Germany's industrial centres. Within 5 years, in Berlin, Ruhrgebiet, Munich and Socialist Bavaria from Lindau to Hof, Bremen and Hamburg as well as in the central industrial region of Thuringia and Saxony, the forces and arms seemed in place to advance social revolution from its agony in isolated Russia towards a genuinely global development. Fighting in Munich and Würzburg street by street against the liquidation of Soviet Bavaria, three homosexual communists - Wollenberg, Wolf and Waibel – founded a friendship for life. Their political, paramili-

tary and sexual maturation went hand in hand in those days when change seemed possible, like never again in the 20th century. Just compare how Theodor W. Adorno and Berthold Brecht thrived a lifetime on the visionary power intrinsic to these most intense months of their youth when class war in Germany was on the brink of being ended. What made Brecht shout from the stages of national theatre "Glottz nicht so romantisch (stop staring with romantic eyes)!" was born in the spring 1919 experience of Augsburg and Munich. Even the author of such delicate atonal cello sonatas as Theodore W. Adorno later frankly attributed his intellectual maturation to the real possibility of settling class relations differently in Germany in the early 1920s. So, it does not come as too much a surprise to us that a homosexual triangle proving essential not only to shout or fiddle, but to actually fight it out, devoted a lifetime to live up to their spring communion on Bavarian barricades. Half a decade later, after a prolonged series of efforts to prove otherwise, an internal document by the central communist party (CP) bureaucracy in Moscow admitted plainly: "These three are inseparable".

"In case we win," an observing Polish communist reported in 1923 with some reserve against the hype of a German breakthrough, "there will be wars of



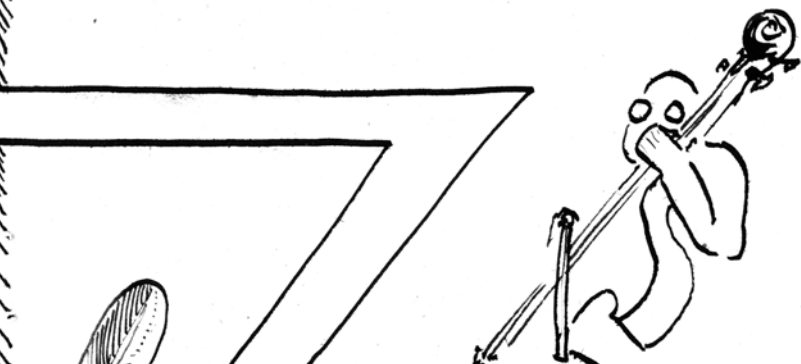


intervention from France and England ahead." Agitation in their armies and working classes, he reminded, is just as important as the current armed uprising in Germany. Wolle, Wolf and Waibel were in fact terribly busy with the later. After 51 months of rising frustration and exasperation being made serving objects in the trenches of World War One, they had chosen to become subjects, agents of change. So, they engaged in another 66 months of revolutionary trench warfare, most of the time literally underground. Wolle, i.e. Erich Wollenberg, started out as early as November 1918 becoming the delegated commander of red militia units after workers had taken over power in his natal region of Königsberg, today's Kaliningrad. In the end of the campaign, after the failed 1923 uprising, he was as illegal as the representatives of the old order and big capital had almost become 5 years earlier. "World revolution is now not a matter of weeks," admits our Polish observer disbelieving, "rather months, it seems. We have to get used to this new situation". New situation meant for our three comrades, that Germany had now become by law of arms a veritable death-trap with minimal spaces to continue political work. Precisely speaking, things had gone worse gradually and steadily. After spring 1920, they had been interned, malnourished in martial arrest, sadisti-

cally abused by prison wards of the victorious reactionary forces pampered by allied trust. One of their commanders, Franz Ritter von Epp already proudly wore Nazi symbols on his free-style uniform. Nevertheless, Wolle, Wolf and Waibel felt that social revolution will overcome national revolution. So, when running through the night, trying to escape from martial arrest for a third time, Wolle gave Waibel a little advantage which did the trick... for Waibel at least. He made it to Moscow. Wolle was caught and made a prisoner again. By spring 1924 however, space for such un-Olympic bravery had become minimal. In contrast to the line of revolution falling, the revolutionary career of Wollenberg rose somehow above his head. The left wing inside the German communist party took the initiative after their joint failure in October 1923. Wollenberg became their designated resource person for integrating the entire military structure mounted for inciting armed working-class uprising in Germany, the so-called "M-Apparat", a name even most internal and confidential documents written in Moscow for Moscow meticulously avoid to mention.

Free association  
of free individuals

But let us refocus, to get in sight  
of the driving collective force



behind these personal career prospects. Actually, what caused certain nervousness among communist party officials from the start was that our intimate gay triangle proved marvellously successful in co-opting new acquaintances to their union in bed, politics and paramilitary preparations. Through party investigations following the course of events, we know about the case of a bright young conscript from the provincial town of Salzwedel in central Germany. Nowadays, it is the curious centre to an extensive hippy colony and thus witnessed a surprise demonstration in support of anti G8-protests in Japan 2008, nicely ridiculing police presence in the town. Back in 1920, German political policing felt somehow less insecure in this backwater. On the one side, there were just 3 members of the independent Labour Party (USPD) in Salzwedel, and not a single organised communist whatsoever. On the other side, important reactionary army units were concentrated just here in the central backwaters. When our young prodigy found himself compelled to serve their commanders with office work, he came across some really uncanny reading. As a matter of fact, he was expected to handle detailed planning evidence to encircle and crush centres of workers' power in revolutionary Germany. They mapped out left activism street by street. In these minute preparations, the

entire geography of an armed attack became visible. After killing some 40,000 social revolutionaries, German generals in command obviously considered that still something quite bigger was needed, an outright military coup. Our young conscript laboriously copied the most sensitive material and tried to activate those two other left ones he happened to know in damned Salzwedel. Fatally enough, they and their waving party proved fairly incapable of valorising the labour of his extra-hours. Instead, for their political and conspirational immaturity, he now risked a somehow one-sided termination of his working contract, i.e. execution under military law.

Where should he go? Ho Chi Min and the Cuban baker Junco had just the same question at that time. The answer for all of them was but one single city. During these years, Moscow ceased to be what it had been built for and became a literal green-house for social dreams losing out in their countries of origin.

In the meantime Wolle and Wolf remained out in the German battlefields of filthy civil war to probe the very limits of extending the front-line. They were not alone. In most strategic German factories, a system of revolutionary committee delegates (revolutionäre Obleute) forced concessions on private owners



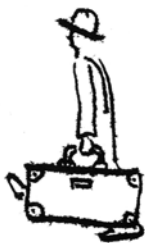
unheard of before. Later, when being pushed back gradually, they wrote thousands of pages of letters to corresponding Russian factory committees. Between the lines, we see how every set-back in the German conflict grinds on workers' power in Soviet Russia itself. Wollé accepts to coordinate the planned October 1923 upheaval in Stuttgart, the production site of Mercedes Benz, designated to set off a proletarian offensive for the South-West of Germany. Whereas the communist party right wing holds command over the red bastions of Thuringia and Saxony, Wollé willingly takes the bitter end. As a consequence, he gets involved in a personal combat with the reactionary security apparatus of the past and future military dictatorship. These specialists of forcefully manufacturing consent were professionally rough-handed to put it mildly. They had made World War One possible over 4 years among a population increasingly tormented by hunger. They saw no problem in shutting away soldiers, such as Heinrich Vogeler or Ernst Toller, into psychiatric institutions for speaking up about the possibility of turning the practical cease-fire on the front with revolutionary Russia into a more stable settlement of conflict. In the following months, executing deserters from the German or Russian side became their daily bread. Wollé was not prepared to compromise with

this type. So with Erich fleeing from the South-West his charge sheet got another entry: the death of a leading figure from the criminal police at Stuttgart. He was already being linked to an execution of reactionary army officers in Bochum. There was little doubt that Wollé was now neatly qualifying for a death sentence if arrested. There was a clear military agenda on the opposing side making use of such juristic formalities if need be. Advancement plans fostered by the left fraction made Wollé a top priority target for repression. Nonetheless, he continued to work underground. Interestingly, he preferred more modest circumstances to a Moscow safe-haven. So again, he exchanged one revolutionary periphery for another.

### Home is everywhere

Back in Eastern Prussia, his home region, he socialises to agitate among army soldiers and farm labourers. Simultaneously, he succeeds in renewing nationwide networking for armed assaults against the new order in Germany. He travels to organise interregional links, distribute explosives, keeping the Capitalist state under attack. Important parts of these networks later emerged as Rotfrontkämpferbund, the most operative anti-fascist formation until the arrival of the US army on German soil. After half a month in the revo-

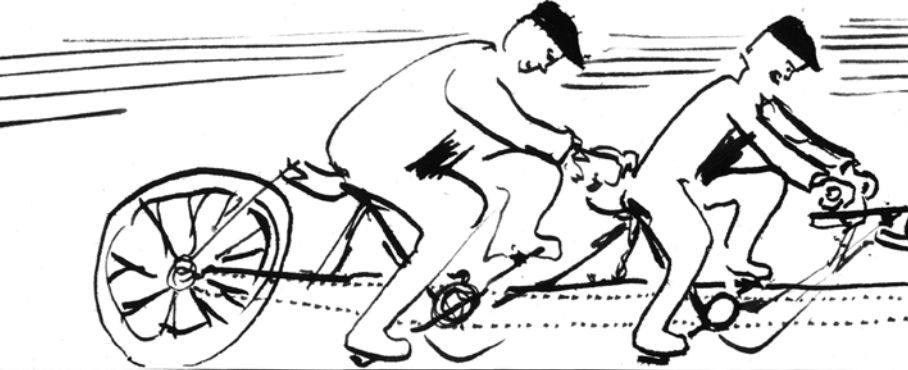




lutionary underground, Wolle and Wolf change their focus of activity. Wollenberg was to take up a false bourgeois identity and start working as a left journalist in Leipzig. Leipzig was home to a large critical working-class readership. They demanded arguments, not paramilitary orders. Already during the last years before the war, Rosa Luxemburg had launched her journalist interventions for a radical left turn in the movement from the Saxon industrial capital. A covert flat was rented for Wollenberg. From later party investigations, we know important details of his personal life in these crucial days. According to all available evidence, only one comrade knew about Wollenberg's job change to Leipzig: Felix Wolf. But when Wollenberg arrives in town, a unit of the Stuttgart criminal police has already taken up position, right at his new flat. Officially, they should have informed the Saxon regional police and operated with their help, but – masterminding revenge for their senior officer – they chose to do it all by themselves. Wollenberg approaches Leipzig from the North-Eastern periphery by train. The Stuttgart criminal police, hours ahead of him, had moved in from the South-Western periphery in a motorised convoy. It was a matter of minutes to prevent them meeting. Wollenberg escaped the death trap by a truly small time margin. A shadow of distrust cast on

his intimate life with Wolf was enough to finally break Wollenberg's front-line spirit after more than nine and a half years of war. With wrecked nerves, they both ran for their lives. Together, they arrived in the world's terribly fragile green-house of revolutionary consolation - the Soviet capital.

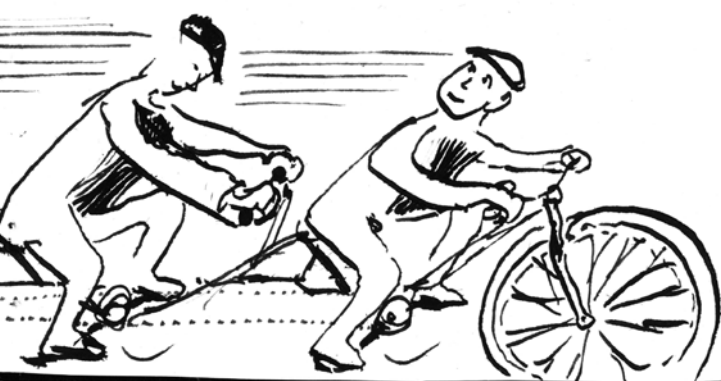
Defeat is a most tricky state for a revolutionary collective. Their shared hopes and concepts for world revolution were temporarily smashed. Absurdly enough, nowhere else than in their retreat could they live out their complex intimate relationship fully for the first time in their lives. The German party machine at work in the city actually proved extremely preoccupied with keeping its prodigies busy in this situation. So, they started what almost every revolutionary group from outright Maoists to the most un-orthodox shadings went through following 1968: they enrolled in a comprehensive course system for systematic theoretical training. What had been a spontaneous tissue of revolutionary faculties was to become a scientific system for facilitating the ultimate counter-attack. That was not exactly the kind of peace settlement they had personally dreamt about. Wolf and Wollenberg soon started to rebel in the classroom. They denounced the instructions they received as reflecting the right-wing party arrange-



ments with revolution at a standstill. Finally, they dismissed themselves from training and its scheduled way of life. They edited a sharp paper igniting inner-party discussions, advocating a more practical and radical left line in revolutionary preparations. In German communist party discussions, the right-wing leadership of the failed October 1923 uprising was in retreat anyway. Quite realistically, Wolf and Wollenberg prepared for being recruited by the left wing on the rise. However, the female idol of the gay circle, Ruth Fischer<sup>C30-C32</sup>, a dominant figure of the ongoing left wing take-over, came to Moscow and chose to ignore their case.

What should they do now? They simply de-militarised. They found that they had far more interesting things to do, plunging into politicised club life, for example. Within a short time, they had all the assets and public functions in their hands to take over the highly prestigious "German Workers' Club" in the middle of the Soviet capital. Among their first measures, they chose Russian comrades to participate in club life. Notably, their no-borders initiative betrays a distinct taste for the avant-garde of world communism. They are out for a group of Kremlin interns. Knowing the possible synergies between social production and private reproduction the club premises become not only

their place of full-time work but also home to an unprecedented open gay commune. At the same time, club life maintained an all-inclusive revolutionary profile in its activities, allowing for other sexual orientations and even non-party-members to participate fully in club activities including administrative functions. The latter fact stirred up some irritation with Russian party organisers. In a vivid discussion, the enlarged collective was asked to account for its membership policies politically. Accountability other than political and consensual was not really feasible during those months. Organisationally, the collective took care to place itself right in between the mandate of Russian and German party organs. Characteristically, Wollenberg, elected to be formally responsible for club activities to the outside took a minor role in the German-Russian discussion, which we know in detail from a minute stenographic protocol. Wolle adds some remarks here and there, that is all. Social dynamics inherent to club life and its specific culture of free discussion provided a complex landscape of multiple dissent and political good-will. The Russian party delegate was not exactly amused: "You demand to be treated like a Russian cell of party members, but you do not bother to transfer everyone from German to Russian membership," she noted with disdain,



but there was more scandal in stall. Actually, non-party members participated in all inner discussions. The Russian guest delegate was quite surprised. There are secrets involved, non-party members simply must not know, she insisted. At this point of negotiations, Wollenberg eventually recalled, that they had taken Russian comrades into their circles during the German revolution without bothering to transfer them to be German party members in the first place. Obviously, Wollenberg was not willing to give up principles of equality between party branches just because they had won in one country and lost in another. After all, they had both won and lost together, hadn't they?

#### Probing the limits of tolerance

Far beyond narrow party politics, club life depended on the quality of informal association. No doubt, Wollenberg is a nuisance to party soldiers, but others are a nuisance as well. Official assessment by German communists keeps several options open until October 1924. But we can observe a heterosexual network engaging with the gay club presidency in a conflict escalating over months and finally leading to a bloody show-down between Wollenberg and Kress. The closer we read the contradicting testimonies, the more we are lead to think, that this conflict is

not ideas fighting in an abstract space, though party fraction alignments are clear, but rather a very emotional and intense clash of different political economies, shaping the understanding of free-time, the organisation of washing and book-keeping, the exercising of professional faculties and the politics of personal relations among activists. We get helpful clues for understanding the most personal aspects at stake when analysing evidence stemming from the interface between the secret military school and open club life. The instructor of the first military course, an experienced and mildly pedagogic elder comrade, took to organising a second edition. According to established rules for the M-Apparat, there should have been no continuity at all. No participant of the first course should know about a second course taking place whatsoever. The authors of secrecy keep up party authority in a military understanding. With most students this works well. It does not work with Wollenberg and Kress. Wilhelm Kress has managed to come to Moscow with his wife. Though not exactly qualified for this double privilege in the assessment of the gay commune, they form a heterosexual social nucleus which is confident of putting forward a series of rather selfish demands. With the first course finishing, the couple is reluctant to leave the support structure associ-

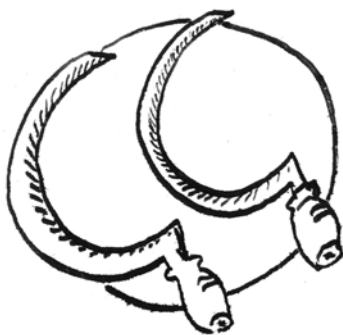


ated with it: a place to live, cash, food. To get rid of their constant demands, the organiser of the courses chooses to go around Moscow himself to find alternative employment for Kress and his wife. He fails to do so, thus in the end he gives in and decides to keep Kress as a course assistant, which is a clear breach of conspirational principles.

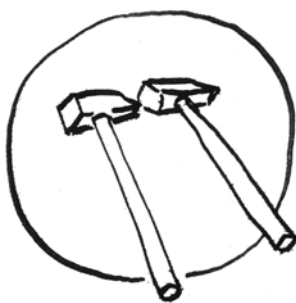
Wollenberg has a different network backing him up, vesting him with confidence to operate contrary to party loyalties. Characteristically, the Club has the most comprehensive library with materials from the German war-zone. When a delegation of young participants of the second course appears at the club library premises to get a ready-made list of items from club bookshelves, Wollenberg grasps immediately that a second edition of the course he has abandoned is being set up. And it is not for long until he understands that his young assistant from military party work in Germany, Fips, is one of the participants. "Wollenberg always does these things with me," Fips admits to the course organiser when interrogated on the grounds of instant suspicion. "As soon as I saw his photograph on the participant form, I knew that Fips must not meet Wollenberg any more," he explains to the jury later. For him, a nice face was evidently enough to suspect, that there was something like a reproduc-

tive link between the two. Heterosexual couples on the path of a revolutionary career like the Kress family, can have children. Over a long time-interval they may foster a clientele to pressure their surroundings. The homosexual commune of Wolf, Wollenberg, Waibel and friends at the heart of political club life in Moscow apparently had a more sublime reproductive potential characterised by decisively different rhythms. They were able to co-opt acquaintances within weeks and link them intensively to their specific fusion of professional and private life. You can judge a party machinery from its reaction to members' talents. People operating this machinery in 1924 were remarkably tolerant to homosexual private life, given their upbringing. But under the stagnation of revolutionary progress outside, the gay commune represented a considerably higher danger to their mechanics than the heterosexual and calculable provocateur Kress.

At the celebrations of the 7th anniversary of the October Revolution, the club invites all comrades with a German background in town. At this point, official party control of homosexual networking acquires a slightly comic note. The second military course including Fips and their elderly instructor attend the commemorative meeting sort-of incognito. While the course instructor is



sitting strategically just to his back, in order to overlook his movements, Fips has nonetheless enough independent initiative to converse with Wollenberg unnoticed. When the instructor gets hold of him again, the two are already engaged in intimate conversation on the corridor. So, the instructor of a school which does not officially exist feels entitled to interfere with the socialising of Wollenberg, the elected person responsible for club life hosting an event much senior than e.g. Christmas in the new Red Calendar. In the end, our instructor sees no way out, but commanding Fips to leave the venue. However, such interference with the dynamics of free association and the political economy of personal reproduction is simply not enforceable by German party officials as soon as Russian comrades get involved. "This whole Kremlin-smička has been made up to provide young boys", a heterosexual witness asserts readily when testifying before the German party inquiry commission. This is at least an exaggeration. The political agenda of the exchange initiative has to the contrary a highly official profile. We know about mutual visits, intense political discussions and, of course, friendships evolving. The problem is rather that Russian Kremlin interns cannot simply be commanded to go home as Fips.



A scandal is needed

Formally speaking, nothing but an official scandal can oust such non-conformist club life from the premises. Though a whole group of heterosexuals became active in this direction, it is Kress who takes the role of agent provocateur en chef for their purposes. In a club meeting with two Russian participants, Kress makes a head front attack on Wollenberg's integrity as a revolutionary. Without proving his allusion, he voices a rumour that Wollenberg is no reliable revolutionary, hinting at possible treason. Wollenberg himself stays rather calm at the meeting itself. Strangely enough, Kress insists on performing a tedious book-keeping operation with his enemy the next morning. According to Erich's own accounts, he lost his temper only during the night following the meeting.

This happened precisely when having tea with his gay friends and the two Russian Kremlin guests in the private rooms of the club premises. As it becomes clear in this intimate atmosphere only, at least one of the Russian-speaking acquaintances had understood that Wollenberg's honour was put in doubt in front of the party. "I have been buried alive in the front-line trenches of World War One. Since then, I have a labile nervous system," he pleads for understanding later, accused before the party's





investigating commission. We can go further back searching for the source of such an absolute meaning of honour and reputation as we find in the commitment of Wollenberg. His father was a lion of Königsberg high society. In his representative zeal, he could not help to become even the president of the "Patriotic Women's League". His son Erich volunteered to submit to the front-line experience of Flanders obeying his father's Prussian imperative. Extraordinarily, he proved ready to cope with the face of an industrialist war the world had not seen before: gas and flame attacks, corpses piling as high as rooftops. By 1917 Wollenberg had advanced to become the commander of a pioneer avant-garde shock-unit serving the German military dictatorship in the Western trenches. Changing sides in November 1918, he had not found the time to bring his medical studies to a satisfactory end. 1924, after a decade lost in war, he had only one profession: social revolutionary, and only one alignment: the communist international. Questioning his revolutionary credibility in the eyes of their Russian hosts meant to deal a blow to his existence. The next morning, he would not remember about any appointment with his enemy. Seeing that Wollenberg is on a promising road to lose his countenance that day, Kress slowly escalates his pressure. After sitting for two

hours in front of their private rooms repeating his demand to work with Wollenberg on the membership lists, he then enters their intimate space ignoring Wollenberg's friends who advise him to go. The conflict gets down to beating and bloodshed. Finally, Wollenberg resorts to the last means at hands for making Kress go, as he explains later when questioned. He gets out a revolver from a drawer and threatens to shoot Kress. When the investigation closes, Wollenberg is ousted from the club and ordered by the German communist party to leave Moscow. The fragmented gay commune retreats into more private, less re-traceable forms. Erich Wollenberg continues his military career inside the Red Army. After serving two years at Saratov, he succeeds in staging a fulminated return to Moscow, taking over command of a special unit of the Red Army on duty inside Kremlin walls. Excluded from the communist party, together with his friend Wolf, after a tactical denunciation in 1933, he is one of the few non-conformist communists who manage to escape to Prague. There, on the brink of material destitution and severely handicapped by a 1932 Nazi assault, he continues to establish collective networks for political action. Characteristically, there were women and men implied in these friendships, e.g. the former lover of Rosa Luxemburg,



Kostja Zetkin, the heterosexual anarchist couple Zenzl and Erich Mühsam with whom he shares a flat and the married Dutch syndicalist Sneevliet, whose political networks re-link the first generation of the communist international in a break-away community. We will meet him in Prague in our third case study. But before that, let's try to explore what stood behind the success in industrial conflict, which convinced Wolle, Wolf and Waibel to converge in Moscow in 1924.

### Taking apart again

*-Just a moment, this Wollenberg is a militarist. Don't you agree that almost everything apart from their sex-life is rather disgusting and not worth imitating? Look, we even know Wollenberg to have vested hopes in winning over SA clientele, a working-class assault division of the Nazis.*

*-His closest friends in 1932, 1933, testified that he consciously risked to make himself the victim of an SA-assembly in Berlin with the most sincere intentions. His internationalism would not allow any compromise or tactical union with Nazis. He obviously committed some misjudgements in 1932. It is quite interesting how his German communist friends defended him at the 1933 investigative commission hearing in Moscow. After 8 years of exile, they argued, he*

could indeed not understand the dynamics and the power of the German middle class. He thought it enough to win over workers wherever they were to prevent the Fascist take-over. He saw only a Fascist problem and a communist way out.

*-No way out of the Nazi mob after his speech, though. The responsible communist party officials failed to assure his personal protection. So, he was beaten up to become a cripple for life right in the former working class stronghold of Berlin-Wedding.*

*-You can reproach Wollenberg that he ascribed the fatal assault to the presence of SS officers only. There was not that much difference between SA and SS in anti-Semitic theory and in anti-communist practice.*

*-There was one difference until the end, though. The SA had a gay leadership. The central figures were murdered by high-ranking Fascist party officials in 1934. Quite a difference to the series of self-critical communist party hearings on Wollenberg's aggression against comrade Kress in Moscow 1924.*

*-Try not to play that pathetic game of comparing communist Cosmopolitanism and Provincial German Fascism. To be sure, economic humanism on the one side and capitalist powered racism on the other are simply two worlds apart. It's insincere to suggest a closeness with the help of analytical tricks. It might be better neither to compare*



with nor ever compare to. Both short-cuts are just too obviously ignorant of big capital sponsoring German fascists to power in 1933 and sponsoring such research nowadays.

*-Last year, the German Historic Institute in Moscow drowned discussions after its pathetic and ritually repetitive conference on Soviet repression in a German colonial pub with German beer. Originally, their sponsoring by the German Export lobby was announced to facilitate research on the German aggression in World War Two.*

*-Every topic changes under the impact of material interest.*

*-And we have material interests ourselves. What should we change here?*

*-To be frank, I have just lost too many resources with political party machinery.*

*-Couldn't you try to argue your next case without the Party playing this awkward role of a mother figure behind revolutionary progress?*

*-I wanted to observe where we land if we try to assess its role dialectically.*

*-It is not enough to be critical; you have to develop the ability to envision life after the ultimate death of the bourgeois party model.*

*Proletarian organisation and working-class hegemony is simply an enemy to party organisation.*

*- Some enemies can be useful in proximity.*

*- Some of them want to be used by you?*

*- Even US-feminists of the 1970s left a door open to sleep with their enemy when necessary.*

*By the way, I am not dissatisfied with Lenin, Marx, Buddha or Wollenberg being privileged by bourgeois upbringing. Contradictions are the only source of substantial progress.*

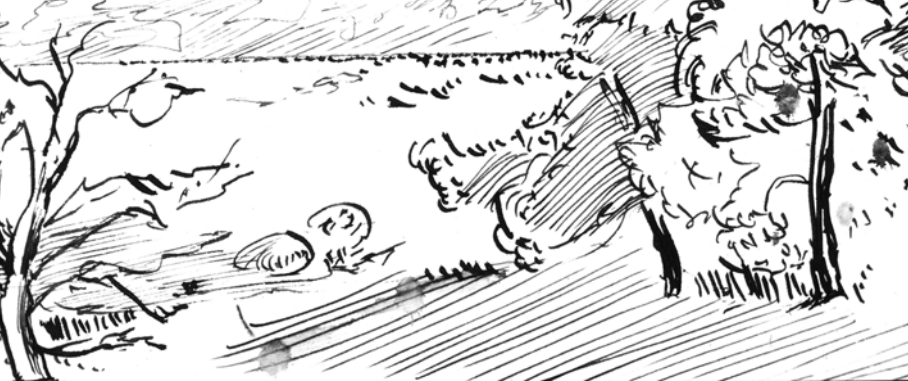
*-Did Wollenberg successfully engage in anything different than military tasks?*

*- He became a contributor to the scientific editions of Lenin's manuscripts. He actually worked several years, day after day, in the very Institute where we found his personal file, allowing us to tell the occulted story of his gay commune.*

*-His commune? Weren't they out to liquidate private property?*

*Why does Wollenberg take centre stage in so many episodes you recall? Where is your promised revolutionary collectivism?*

*-Collectives support no stand-still. If you deal with stroboscopic shots highlighting historic moments and constellations of transitory power you are often left with nothing else than individual conflict which might betray only traces of collective faculties characterising the epoch. Today, there is a supposed scientific commission deciding on the case of each Comintern personal file. They investigate priorly whether handing it out could harm the interests of current G8-Russia. I got Wollenberg's file, I spent weeks on its thousand or so pages. I*



copied out about 30 pages a day. I had enormous fun in figuring and easing out all the hints and traces scattered in there. Later, I was deported from Russia for political reasons in June 2008, before getting a positive decision on the Wolf and Waibel files.

*-That is why you say, we have to search the enemy files? Do you mean the enemy is the communist party conducting the Wollenberg hearings or is our enemy rather its lousy heir, the new Imperial Russia?*

-Friendly files were lost together with the Social revolution in Russia.

*-1917, 1918 or 1924?*

-That question is put too simply, maybe it was lost once more in 1993 when Eltsin crushed the Moscow self-management of neighbourhoods and productive units with a major military assault on the city. We know that the extent of violence was similar to the Peking counter-insurgency in 1988, leaving much more than the official death-toll on the streets and stadiums used for torture and execution.

*-The 1993 turn was sold as a democratic salvation of Russia in the West.*

-There are some parallels to celebrating the democratic salvation of Chile 1973 by Pinochet and Friedman. Neoliberalism is an expert at selling.

*-Why do you jump scale?*

-It's not exactly my idea to jump this way. It's a contemporary readers' response. "October

1993" was the first priority issue raised when we discussed the following story at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Russian Social Forum in 2006. The Har'kov experience of 1914-1920 made many contemporary activists recall the direct socialisation and bottom-up management of their own cities. Take Moscow 1987-1993 and Har'kov 1916-1927. Voilà, two city panoramas, inspired by a working class that has learned that almost everything is possible in a social revolution.

*-That means everything can be lost when so much had been won?*

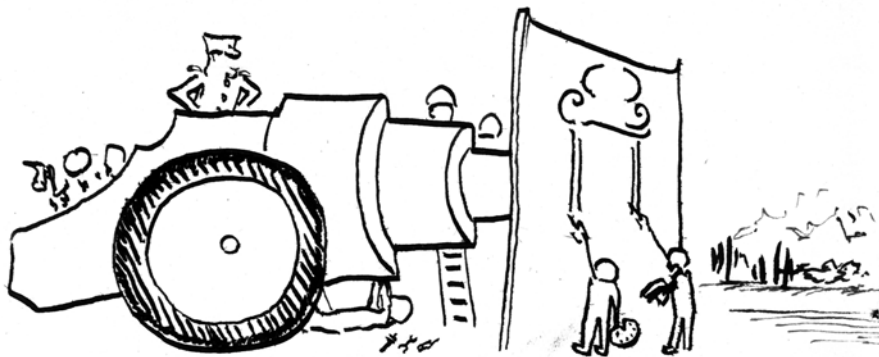
-Everything.

*-How can you tell?*

-Maybe, you can tell, when you end up in a party.

#### Bike attack on police line, 1914

It is women and men in their places of everyday life and work who effect change in history. Ironically enough, wherever a class society comes down, we can make a difference between those who want to represent the new and those who work on it. On the one side, those at the workplaces: in the kitchens, factories and places of childcare create new modes of production, distribution and social exchange. On the other side, those who have managed to place themselves at the interface of old and new control over production experiment with new modes of speaking, co-ordinating and



armed command. As long as Capitalism is still a deadly threat, they need each other. However, not on any terms!

Workers' agency is highly contradictory and could have produced utterly differing outcomes. So, fascinated by collectives, not by the conformism they tend to assert, I choose to trace rather proletarian outsiders here to portray the background they were so eager to change.

Har'kov in 1914ff was a workers' city by all standards. It was part of a cosmo-political space of urban exchange taking place between Riga and Vladivostok. Simultaneously, it became central to a vast agricultural uprising. However, even in the midst of a general civil war with severe disruptions and shortages, there were nevertheless more than 30,000 industrial workers maintaining the ability to combine their skills in urban production. Still, their main toil was to relate, amalgamate and accumulate on the basis of agricultural productivity by the surrounding country in turmoil. Against the odds and incredible hardship, they were producing agricultural tools as well as war supplies for the extensive rural fronts. They could hardly do so without personal networks of support behind every officially paid worker. Workers who are not on the payroll performed essential work for maintaining industrial produc-

tion. It is misleading to call them e.g. domestic workers, for their power resource is also that they can leave home and socialise regardless of the factory regime. Gardening, housekeeping, patrolling, childcare, getting food from the countryside, and securing the living spaces against the forthcoming winter were tasks just as integral to the social process we are interested in as losing a lifetime on the shop floor, where hours got counted for cash remuneration.

HPZ - a human fortress?

Throughout the war and civil war 1914-1921, the Har'kovskij Parovozostroitel'nyj Zavod (HPZ) was by far the biggest factory of the region. Its paid workforce rarely fell below 6,000 with female workers taking an important part in the daily effort to comply with world market conditions under war. They were held terribly busy with producing one of the most incremental tools for empowerment in the vast stretches of land stirred by Russian Revolution: steam power locomotives. Yet, in 1920, the productivity of the immense plant was quite changed from the initial years of World War I. In its beginning, the factory was still owned by a Petersburg stock company making extra-profits out of the Imperial war policies. In 1920 workers at the Har'kov Locomotive plants were working less hours and





more on what they considered first priority. They built a series of tank trains to be used against the British-paid interventionist army ravaging the southern provinces. They equipped Agit-prop trains to bring literacy and cinema to the countryside. These trains were painted all over by visual art collectives to carry the messages of the revolutionary centres around the country: equality for women and men, abolition of private ownership in production and general military mobilisation against those who wanted to roll back revolutionary change. Theatre groups were claiming new social places for their work. They started to play on shop-floors, demonstrations, parades and in public places. In 1920 the elected basic factory committees were still an important factor in decision-making for their workshop's productivity and thus the region as a whole. In the summer of 1920, while conducting negotiations for emergency raw metal supply via Moscow they decided to devote a gigantic piece of work to a workers' theatre. Instead of the fluffy illusionary paintings and representative interiors of the old drama societies, new theatre collectives like the TRAM (Theatre of Workers' Youth) now put the working of big collectives on stage and made the action circle around the operation of giant machinery. For those who need to put it in a nutshell, the Har'kov locomotive works (HPZ)

were the "fortress of revolution" in the South, as a bol'shevik author summed it up some years later; a fortress though, where bol'shevik agitators could hardly set foot in before 1917, to be precise. Bol'shevik groups in their fragile urban hiding consisted mainly of students, workers and activists deported from the capitals and the front zones. Still in 1922, there was less than one per cent of the workforce affiliated to the bol'shevik party. At this time, Har'kov had become a thriving capital of the post-war Ukrainian Socialist Republic. Large institutions and administrations were set up in the city, which boasted of almost full party affiliation. What had alienated the flagship of revolutionary production from the social network of revolutionary decision-making?

Surprisingly, I find it actually extremely difficult to tell what it was, taking into account that the apparently banal result of history is always stained with the traces of aborted possibilities.

Capitalism means probing the limits of productionist accumulation. In the summer of 1914, this meant war. A haunting project indeed lingered over the whole of the old continent. It involved a massive task of social engineering. A curiously unanimous interest to industrialise aggression on an all-encompassing scale got hold of ruling classes across their ready-made front lines. Women

and teenagers were pushed into military supply production at lesser wages and longer working hours. A new dimension of discipline expected from the lower orders to produce or kill on command and function physically on the brink of starvation.

At the same time, this new continental order succeeded in co-opting major labour organisations. Every respectable member of society now policed the surrounding against attempts to resist, slow down or divert the course of the respective national war machine. In a public park in the centre of Har'kov, on the early morning of Mayday 1915, the Imperial police managed to find and destroy a forlorn red flag and a badly legible workers' pamphlet against the war. Protest was timed according to the Western European calendar in force in the town only 3 years later. Notably the bol'shevik flyer was printed on an underground machine that betrayed a truly desolate state. Like in a Blairite dream, the public part of the city was virtually politically clean before sunrise on this first International Labour Day in wartime.

Still, during the preceding summer of industrial struggle in 1914, Har'kov workers had clearly developed the potential to relate successfully to a possible European-wide strike movement against the war build-up. Never since 1907 had the weapon of strikes been used so widely as in 1914. And it was precisely one of these last summer mornings, when the general run-up to the Great War could still be stopped by an international general strike, that a woman presented herself to the Russian Imperial Police operating an outpost in the factory district of Har'kov. "My, rabochy narod (we are the toiling folk)" she insisted in front

of the investigator. Then, she started to tell a moving story about why her son Laz'ko had been so unfortunate as to drive through a police roadblock before the Locomotive factory on his bicycle the day before. "All he wanted was to do his Christian duty", she assured and demanded his release from prison. She emphasised that it was herself who had sent him to care for the graves of the dead forefathers at the cemetery, a holy duty he was only too eager to fulfil, thus ignoring the police line before the factory.

A governor's evening out on business

Laz'kos's case, though, was already in the hands of political police. They minutely protocolled every detail of his mother's story and sent the wording directly to the regional Governor of Har'kov. Remarkably, this direct representative of the Tsar was himself personally involved in important dealings behind the police lines Laz'ko wanted to break through. According to political police intelligence, Laz'ko had come directly from the Gelferich-Sadé farming tools factory, no. 2 in the region, which went on strike that morning. He was by all probability a messenger calling for the locomotive works to join industrial action. The working collectives at Gelferich-Sadé had an extensive experience of appropriating their place of work militantly. In the aborted revolution of 1905, they first assembled in the canteen to then take over the whole factory, surrendering it only after their barricades were being dissolved under artillery fire. When they walked out of work in 1914, their main preoccupation was not to become the object of armed intervention. They were

quick to disperse. The majority simply went home. Yet, in the evening after Laz'kos arrest the governor himself gave a reception for certain workers from the locomotive plant, where they were officially charged with administering funds for sick-pay. This was actually the covered-up officialdom of established Social democrat representation in their factory. In the end, the

workforce at HPZ turned out to be firmly compliant to their workers' leaders pro-war stance, legitimising the military build-up as a measure of defence. In fact, there was a more important promise of a future industrial boom at stake, and exemption from conscription was likely for qualified masters of their trade.

Only after major losses on the

## German source documentation, I



*Erich Wollenberg, (1892-1973), a gay communist at his workplace in Moscow, 1924*

*aus seiner Kritik der rechten Parteiführung im Oktoberaufstand 1923 vom 5 VII 1924 [125:] : „der Militärapparat [der KPD, MA] bereitete [126:] sich auf einen Kampf mit allen möglichen illegalen Faschistenverbänden vor und vergaß dabei Reichswehr und Schupo [...] die Staatsorgane, die deutsche Bourgeoise [...] Koalitionspolitik mit ‚linker SPD‘ gab papiernen Resolutionen, Koalitionsvereinbarung [...] daher ‚Betriebshundertschaften‘ daraus mechanisch Bataillone, Regimenter und Divisionen [...] Taktik und Strategie des Feldkriegs beim Aufstand [...] Wrangel, Denikin-*

*Erfahrungen einfach übertragen, während das Proletariat seine Massenverbände erst im Kampf und für den Kampf organisiert [...] Die niederen Chargen [unter verantwortlichen MA-Militärarbeitern] machten durch Feldsoldatenerfahrungen die MA Defizite wett. [Perspektive:] bei größeren Kämpfen wird das deutsche Proletariat einen Mangel an militärisch geschulten Leuten haben.“ Programm der Militärschule vom Mai bis Juli 1924 in Moskau [130:] „kritische Untersuchung und Auswertung aller Bürgerkriegskämpfe, besonders in militärpolitischer Hinsicht (Frankreich: Kommune 1871, Russland 1905 und 1917-1921, Deutschland: Spartakuskämpfe, bayrische Räterepublik, Ruhrkämpfe, Kapp-Putsch, Märzaktion, Hamburg*

Russian Western front workers at both factories relearned to strike. In June 1916, workers of the locomotive plant stay in front of the gates. They are locked-out, but they do not disperse. The governor does not receive workers' delegates any more. His police informants take an astonishingly long time to establish why work is put down by thousands of factory hands.

As early as the 3rd of May 1916, the political police officers start to suggest, that with police clubbing alone, war discipline in production cannot be enforced any more. Ironically, it is they who now appeal to the governor, arguing that the past strikes were "unpolitical". When the factory administrator, Kats, the political police (Ohrana), and the governor discuss anti-strike action,

## source documentation I

1923, Ungarn Räterepublik, Bulgarien: Revolution 1922/1923).

„Podozrenija v Pederastii“

Denunziation durch Kress vom 31 X 1924 [136-138]: „aus Gründen, die aus der persönlichen, homosexuellen Veranlagung von Wollenberg resultieren (die an sich natürlich kein Argument gegen ihn ist, es aber dadurch wird [Stilfehler im Original-schreiben] dass er seine Stellung als Parteifunktionär sowohl in Deutschland, als auch hier [in Moskau], dieser Veranlagung nutzbar machte) die Ausübung dieser Funktion durch Wollenberg eine Schädigung des Klubs und damit der Partei bedeuten.“ [zum eigenen Klubauftritt, Kress vom 27 X] „Eine Mitaufröhlung der Frage seiner abnormen Veranlagung, die ich bei ihm als den Ausdruck bürgerlicher [im Original ‚bürgerlicher‘] Dekadenz betrachte, konnte ich nicht verantworten, da positive [Unterschiede im Original] Beweise nicht vorhanden waren. Dies trifft wenigstens auf Russland zu, obwohl das ganze Verhalten von ihm, besonders den Kreml-Kursanten gegenüber sehr bezeichnend ist. In Bezug auf Deutschland steht die Sache fest da sich [Streichungen im Original] ein Zeuge, der Objekt ~~einer~~ seiner

Veranlagung war, zur Verfügung steht, und sich gegenwärtig in Moskau befindet. Ich glaube, daß dieses Vorgeschichtliche zum Verständnis meiner Stellung ausreicht [...] Wilhelm Kress“

Entgegnung durch Erich Wollenberg vom 10 XI 24 [139] „1918 im Krieg verschüttet [...] drei Jahre Gefängnis [...] 1 ½ Jahre in Deutschland unter den schwersten Bedingungen verfolgt, illegal gearbeitet, zuletzt 5 Monate unter Anklage wegen Mord, Hochverrat usw. bei voraussichtlicher Verurteilung zur Todesstrafe.“ [...], trägt zusammen, 166:] Kress habe seine Stellung genutzt, um seine Frau mitkommandieren zu lassen. Frau Kress sei drei Tage vor Abfahrt aus Deutschland noch persönlich auf der Polizei gewesen wegen Passangelegenheiten. Wilhelm Kress in anderem Zusammenhang „meine Frau war schwer illegal“.

Wollenberg: „Ich habe ihm gesagt, das Hereintragen persönlicher Beziehungen in Politik ist Korruption.“

Beurteilung durch den Referenten Rosental, Moskva, 26 VII 1926 [148, 149]: „die Durchbildung des Genossen Wollenberg als militärischen Spezialisten liegt im Interesse der deutschen revolutionären Bewegung“.





# Czech source documentation, III

Fighting to keep up workers' collective property, almost all activists

**Národní správa fy.**  
**KOMMISSARISCHE VERWALTUNG**

**WÄSCHE** **KINDER- BEKLEIDUNG**

**HAKE**  
Schutz Marke

**HUGO ASCHERMANN**  
Zentrale: PRAG II. Heuwaagplatz 7  
FABRIK: KOLIN I.  
Telegrammadr.: Aguton - Fernsprecher: 39904

Reichs-Betriebs-Nummer  
0/1200/0745

**Zemský národní**

**Německý tiskopis jen do spotřebování  
šetrným papírem.**

**Váco: protest proti zrušení národní správy v po-  
původním majitelům.**

Dne 25. IX. 1945 dostavil se do naší kancel.  
Havlíčkovu nám. 7 bývalý majitel firmy pan Ott  
provedu 3 odbavovatelů Národního výboru pro P  
jichž mluvčí p. Šikýř prohlásil, že jdem podnik  
dat majiteli p. Guttmanovi podle příkazu Zeme  
boru. Výnos byl ku přečtení předložen. Národn  
přítomný člen závodní rady p. Stanislava Skál  
ky proti takovému postupu, když nebyla vyřízen  
vodní rady protestující proti zrušení nár. spr  
ní rada nebyla před rozhodnutím slyšena. P. Ši  
tázel jsou-li všichni zaměstnanci politicky o  
hybné odpovědi prohlásil, že se nedá nic děla  
vyslovil podiv jak národní správce tak i člen  
ukazem, že jsme přes v hospodářském podniku, k  
Po, té odebral se p. Šikýř s nár. správcem, p. Gu  
von do hospodářské komise k p. Bru. Krejzovi, k  
odbyl tím, že zemský národní výbor je víc než  
vodní rady nefungují, že nemají pravomoc a že  
dekret, že předání se musí provést. Po návr  
nosti bylo přikročeno k soupisu zařízení, sčís  
tovostí o čemž sepeán protokol a výslovnou v  
tele, národního správce a závodní rady o plné  
dání k tomuto protokolu. Pak naléhal p. Šiký  
ni soupisu a předání v továrně v Kolíně, kter  
27. IX. 1945.

Závodní rada zastupující nejen podepsané  
ale i švedlany domácí /celkový počet zaměstn  
siti a vrácení podniku manželům Guttmanovým  
vyřízeny uvedené v podání na Národní výbor p  
18. září 1945, závodní rada nebyla o stísnosti  
vyslechnuta a bez jakéhokoli vyšetřování by  
o zrušení národní správy podniku. Tím bylo i  
drženy předpisy dekretu presidenta republiky  
a rozhodnutí zemského národního výboru o vrá  
majitelům bylo vydáno na mylném a nesprávném

# source documentation III

...are women, Prague Oct. '45

ha 26. září 1945

výbor  
Praha - XVI

niku a předání jeho

áse v Praze-II.,  
o Guttman v do-  
razu I.-VII., je-  
likvidovat a pře-  
kého národního vý-  
í správce firmy a  
ová činili námit-  
a dosud podání zá-  
ávy, poněvadž záve-  
kyt se pak především  
organizování a po vy-  
at. Na této poznámce  
ka závodní rady s po-  
am politika nepatří.  
ttmann a pí. Skálo-  
terý velmi krátce vše  
závodní rada, že zá-  
teprve vyjde o nich  
ta do podnikových míst-  
ob zhoří a převzetí ho-  
výradou původního maji-  
m práva případných do-  
o urychlené provede-  
á má být provedena dne

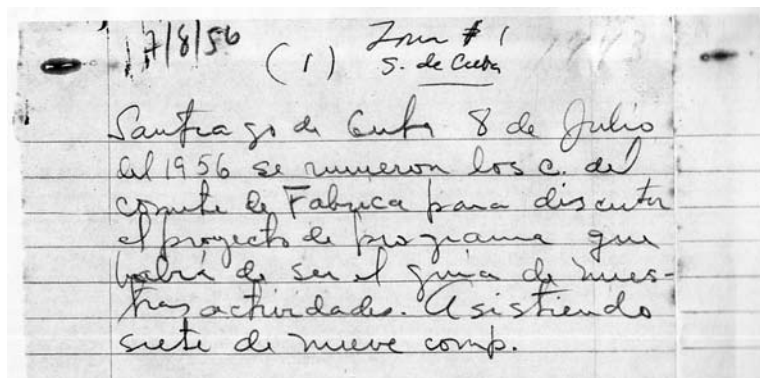
dílenká pracovníce,  
auch 80/nemile souhla-  
m, jako dosud nebyly  
ro Prahu I.-VII. dne  
ch v podání uvedených  
lo vydáno rozhodnutí  
ízení vadné, nebyly do-  
se dne 19.V.1945 13  
lození podniku bývalým  
a podkladě.-

Marie Glorová  
Anna Nováková  
Helena Kaplanová  
Novotná Božena  
Kavle Lábelková  
Masopustová E  
Lábelková J  
Procházková Milada  
Korčíková Jaroslava  
Dobromila Lánská  
Marie Vrbková  
Vlasta Jerolimová  
Helena Štěpánková  
Marie Urbanová  
Vlasta Procházová  
Alena Jungrová  
Jaroslava Šimodová  
Růžena Malinová  
Beránková Šuroušová  
Vlasta Samančíková  
Božena Kukulová  
Marie Urbanová  
Růžena Štěpánková  
Marie Klíčková  
Marie Štěpánková  
Marie Štěpánková  
Marie Štěpánková  
Kdeňka Váňová  
Váňová  
H. Štěpánová  
Váňová  
G. Štěpánová

social explosive, tearing apart the pro-war menševik hegemony in the course of 1917, is pay discrimination for untrained workers, the so-called "blacks". When unskilled workers take independent industrial action of the wildcat type in Summer 1917, anarchist and bol'shevik agitators first appear successfully on the shop-floors of the locomotive works, agitating in

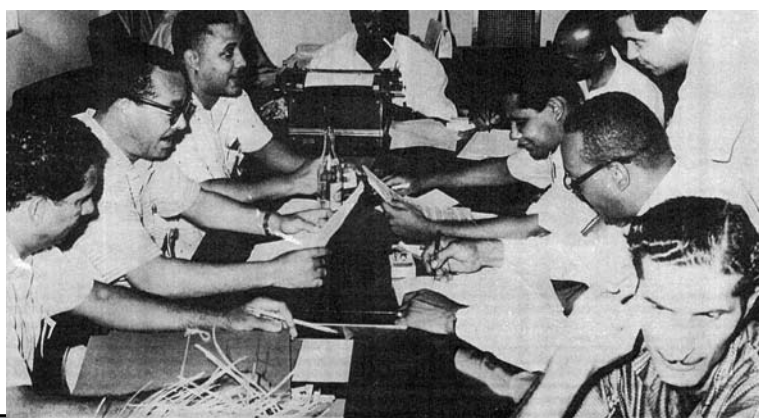
remarkable unison. Both are still a minority within the newly established city soviet, not to speak about the bourgeois city council. But on the shop-floors and in the working-class neighbourhoods, their demands start to inspire bottom-up radicals. In summer 1917, the counter-offensive to reinforce capitalist supremacy in industrial relations provokes the exact opposite

## Cuban source documentation, IV



Preparing Cuban revolution in factory committees.

Printing workers - a highly literate collective co-ordinating nation-wide transition from private to public production at a first revolutionary conference in Cienfuegos (c27). The central figures are later exposed as "derechistas (right-wingers)" and ousted from centralising union work.



of its aims. A growing majority in the workforce gets tired of pushing through economic demands which are then levelled by inflation. Instead of demanding change, they prepare to take over production. In October 1917, two weeks before the Petrograd ousting of moderate government, workers simply took to arresting the administrative body of the factory. The central management in the capital pressured the Kerensky regime for military intervention against the factual take-over of power by the factory committees in Har'kov. However, the

workforce had already secured major support in the city's garrisons. The power shift in Har'kov's major industries is so swift that local bol'sheviks do not really see the need to take over political power militarily as in Petrograd and Moscow. There are characteristic clashes between the bol'shevik military delegate from Moscow, Antonov-Ovsenko, and the Har'kov worker delegate, Artjom, of the same party. Artjom has recently returned from exile in Australia and favours a negotiated labour supremacy. Only by the end of December, the Moscow line is

## source documentation IV

**1er**

**CONGRESO  
REVOLUCIONARIO  
GRAFICO**

**PAPELEROS,  
CARTONEROS  
Y SUS ANEXOS**

*Celebrado en la ciudad de  
Cienfuegos, Las Villas, los  
días 8 y 9 de Agosto de  
1959, Año de la Libertad.*

**CIENFUEGOS - LAS VILLAS**



enforced – not for long though. According to their dealings at Brest-Litovsk, the town is taken over by German occupants and allied Ukrainian nationalists a 100 days later. The late bol'shevik call to evacuate machinery and tools from Har'kov industry before their arrival is in fact prominently sabotaged by workers. Regardless of the bol'shevik peace settlement with Imperial Germany, the town of Har'kov is not surrendered peacefully. An anarchist battalion with Nestor Mahno assists in street-fighting within working-class neighbourhoods. Probably during these days, contacts and mutual knowledge is being established which proves incremental for a specific development of workers power in town two years later. But militarily, this alliance cannot win yet. In the end radical workers and revolutionary soldiers leave Har'kov. A document from committee work on the retreat is reproduced on c22. Nonetheless, the mainstream of workers would not be moved. This meant in the end, that they kept their tools and workplaces in town, losing control of them in the meantime.

The new German-Ukrainian command takes over the neighbourhood militarily and establishes firm political policing in workers' districts. Simultaneously, the former factory director Kats is able to re-establish the counter-offensive at the workplace, which was characteristic of the months before the management was arrested. His correspondence with the Factory committee is now chillingly stiff and formal, using tactical advantages cunningly and with the clear knowledge of having the police on his side again. Obviously it is not much of a problem for him to supply the opposite side in the Great War with locomotives now. He might change sides in national terms, but he would not change sides in class war. Kats is a charmer for socially tamed workers' leaders and a master of playing for time. Obviously, not only the workers have learnt enormously within 12 months of Social Revolution, but capital has learnt as well. So, already in spring 1918, half a year before introducing some Social Democrat adornments to capital rule in Germany, England and France, the German occupa-

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## source documentation IV

Fabio Abraham Grobart (1905-1994) at work in the party's historic institute (4th from the left), archival photography from the late 1980s.





tional regime of Har'kov proves able to establish peace with labour all the while preserving the core of capital relations.

Property rights for Har'kov's locomotive works were transferred to a board of owners in the new Ukrainian capital of Kiev. Strikes and the granting of quite insufficient compensation for wage inflation continued. The workshop environment returned under temporary control by the moderate Social Democrat fractions.

In January 1919, the occupational regime was thrown out of the town with the help of some remaining German soldiers organising in joint revolutionary soviets (the uncle of Hans Eisler was one of them, Eisler was later to compose the worldwide anthem of the Comintern and speaks up on our page c31). The collapse of the German war machine was certainly a great leap forward for workers demands in the town. But activists remained remarkably reserved. No word about re-arresting the management now. All their energy and initiative went into the forthcoming civil war with the intervention armies under Denikin and Vrangel'<sup>c21</sup> "Wrangel". The operations and equipment of the new enemy was masterminded by the victorious allies France and Britain. Their frontline hit the town itself only in summer. But few of the workers volunteering for this war were to return from the long drawn-out retreat battles accompanying the second defeat of revolutionary Har'kov. It is generally accepted that the informal Mahno Republic and its rural guerilla warfare was probably the decisive stumble-stone bringing the construction of a new Western colony in Russia's South to fall.

So, in January 1919 the Red army had moved in to stay for just 6 more months. From a minute protocol we know details about a first legal bol'shevik cell meeting in the Har'kov working-class district "Petrinski Rajon". Their main concern seems to be to draw together expertise from the shop-floors to understand the shifting interests in the factories of the area. Notably, there were no bol'shevik party organisations in the factories yet. However, there were some party delegates active within the factory committees. These committees clearly had the social initiative in their hands. While party officials had lost support in the factory leaving the site, factory committees had remained in place and kept up strong links to volatile workers' sympathies. Visibly, the new party in political power desperately needed to co-opt interests in the factories. Listening to reports about conflicts on the shop-floors, its organisers clearly took a cautious and reactive role. In many places directors appointed by the Red Army had met outright hatred from working people as had the former directors. Even when the British-sponsored intervention troops take over the town for another half a year, executing many of their working class opponents down to the age of 12, Kats remains in charge as director of the Locomotive works, and by 1920 has steered the strategic industrial giant through 5 years of war, 2 revolutions and 5 military changes of sides in the civil war.

Only in January 1920, the third Red Army occupation puts an end to his hegemony. On the 20th of January 1920, the locomotive works of Har'kov are declared socialist property. In practice, this means for months and years to follow, that



a central administration from Moscow negotiates new compromises with the factual control of the factory committees on the ground. The trade union (itself with central direction from Moscow) evolves to be the transmission buffer for the ensuing struggle over power on the shop-floor and material redistribution in town. The early Soviet industrial statistics soberly document that strikes do not diminish, but they are settled quicker. Interestingly, Marx had not predicted more. Socialism will just improve workers' position within ongoing class conflicts, he predicted reviewing the experience of the 1871 Paris Commune.

However, in Har'kov half a century later, social unrest in the factories seems to press for a new stage or at least a short-cut to classless society under the impression of the vast anarchist republic developing in the South of the town. Their uprising inspired by Nestor Makhno temporarily comprised the largest anarchist territory in world history. When an end to interventionist wars seems at hand, the informal republic is in the position to strike a 4th consecutive peace deal with Soviet power. This agreement between anarchists and communists is concluded in the city of Har'kov in October 1920. A telegraph from Har'kov to Moscow, suggests freeing anarchist prisoners if the centre could agree to such

a measure. Ironically, the South had already signed a promise to release as part of the treaty. As if to sell the regional deal to the capital, those responsible in the South praise it to be very beneficial to the communist side and advise to prevent the prisoners to travel to Har'kov. Only days later, they are in Har'kov. The city seems to turn into a bee hive of anarchist mobilisation. A Makhno newspaper distributed in the factories and garrisons informs that its public office in the capital of Soviet Ukraine, Har'kov, is working 24 hours a day. Reports to Moscow note with rising unease that anarchists succeed in building up considerable support inside local army units, as well as in the factories. They are reported as agitating successfully in HPZ. Finally, an anarchist strike brings the locomotive works to a standstill. For a month, operating freely inside the Soviet state on the basis of the new peace agreement, further Moscow anarchists are being invited for a general conference of the movement in Har'kov. The invitations are transmitted with the advice to claim places in the special railway wagons reserved for the Soviet command, referring to the peace treaty in force. Such a build up sounded just too familiar for communist functionaries. The joint anarcho-bol'shevik October 1917 uprising in Petrograd was equally preceded and timed in accordance with a large

» In his letter from East Berlin to Har'kov, he mentions his nephew Hans but



delegates conference in the town. Already two nights before the final crack-down, the mood seems set among communist security organs to break the urban and rural strongholds of their allies before their conference begins.

The fate of the arrested becomes a lengthy preoccupation of the central Politburo. In the end Lenin concedes, that the support of Western anarchists e.g. from France and the United States for some of the anarchist prisoners at Har'kov has to be taken seriously. "We still need the anarchists in the West", he admits predicting that world revolution could not yet do without them. Their release, however, was only possible after lengthy negotiations, in which the anarchist counterparts from the West had to guarantee that none of them would return to Russia again.

A campaign is started after 23rd November 1920 to "clean" the workforce of the locomotive factory from "anarchist elements".

Among the very few names of communist party members in the locomotive works 1922, we find a familiar one: Laz'ko, the militant biker of 1914. Would things have gone differently if he had pedalled just a little faster on a summer morning in 1914? Global Bohemia for Council Communism

*Soviet deadlock. Why do you still want to reiterate it for Czech landscapes?*

-Every family is unhappy in its own way.

*-So now, we get another case of forcefully building up state socialism at the points of Red Army bayonets?*

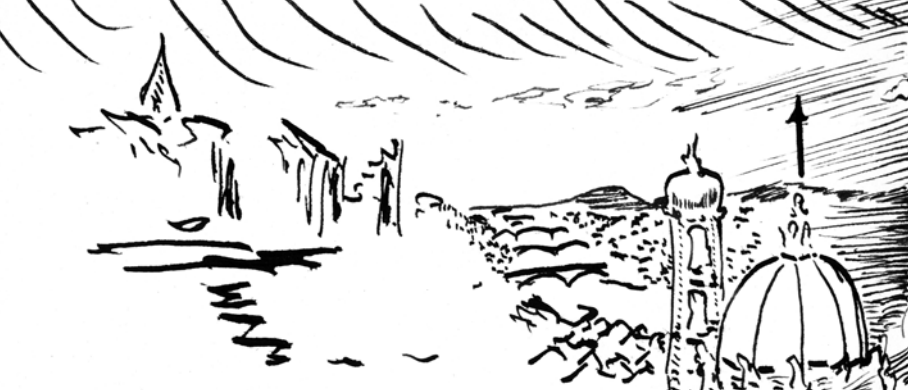
-To be precise, the Soviet Army did not occupy Czechoslovakia before 1968. I wanted to give some hints from Czech social movements in the years 1920-1948. They might explain why it was just not necessary to occupy Prague militarily.

*-Is there anything original about these hints?*

-Funnily, I spotted most of them in Moscow archives. They show how differently Socialism develops when built on differing bases of collective faculties. Bohemia was not a recently recolonised ex-slave-society like Cuba nor a superficially defeudalised society under rising military coercion like revolutionary Russia. According to the written traces left by them, the observers of Czech affairs at the Comintern 1920-1945 were indeed full-blood professionals of instrumentalising collective initiative. Regardless of the increasingly authoritarian mechanisation taking over in their dream to make world-revolution happen, they were indeed well-trained to be attentive to differences and dialectical turns.

*-Some of their slogans sound terribly parrot-like, their schemes*

*-Everything has been said on the*



of addressing social mobilisation seem to be inspired by the boredom of mathematical tables. Don't you remember Hans Eisler in Berlin: "I am flabbergasted to see our ideals of Socialism; the highest ideals of mankind pronounce itself through such scum (so schäbig)"?

-Don't forget that the task was to address workers brought up for one of the most industrialised societies of the world at that time. Mathematical tables and simple catch-phrases bore the promise of an industrial rationalisation dividend. This dividend was continually being privatised before their eyes, taken out of their hands in the industrious misery of everyday life. To the contrary, in their social movements it visibly became a public good. In the eyes of many sincere activists at that time, the real dividend of industrial standardisation seemed within reach to empower the working classes. They foresaw a path of human development revealing the US-American dream as what it really is, a rather simplistic nightmare. -That's like computer kids today, hoping that Communism will come to them through the internet.

-Even our discussion would not be possible without the internet. -Give me an example. Did the Comintern after Zinoviev pursue any real workers' interest, any real possibility of progress, surpassing the US-American, the hated and ultimately adored

counterpart? In 1943, a simple wish from Washington ended the Comintern's existence. Wasn't Soviet ambition for industrialist hegemony really prefiguring the Washington consensus?

-The Czech activities of the Comintern were continued otherwise and quite effectively after 1943. Certainly, Washington was not fit to mount such expertise as the Comintern in the early 1920s for a world-wide consensus.

-Just note the cadres who were bought out of Soviet planning institutions for Roosevelt's think tanks. They helped shape the US-economy to win World War Two.

-There is a different line inherent to the administrative body of the Comintern nonetheless.

### Proletarian pen pals

Take the correspondence between Prague and Moscow tramway workers facilitated by such a dull and mechanically defined department as the organisational division of the Comintern (Organisation-sabteilung - Org. Abt.). From 1924 onwards, Moscow and Prague working class collectives actively exchanged essential data on workers' committees. They communicated on how much party interference could be tolerated in workers' self-management, how much leisure, winter clothing at work, bottom-up resistance and technical



empowerment was necessary for a worker-friendly modern urban transport system. Still today, the Prague tramway and public transport system is one of the best in the world. Even the delegates of IMF and World Bank had to resort to public transport for evacuation when we cut off all surface connection between them and the world around them in the mass protests of September 2000.

*- During the Marshall plan, West Germany asked for 50,000 locomotives running on regional coal. The US delivered some 80,000 lorries running on American fuel instead. Such strategic investment is indeed decisive in shaping the ideas of urbanity, progress and vital interest in following generations.*

-Take constructivist art as a second example. It's the spectacular child of the Russian revolution. Funnily, Majakovskij understood the thrilling Soviet authorship of the novelty only when leaving the Soviet Union for France.

*-However, the real breakthrough of constructivist architecture in Soviet cities came alongside the first 5-year-plan. That means authoritarian mobilisation made up the workforce to build the wonderful constructivist structures of open space.*

-Contradictions mark the beginning, not the end of left thinking. We simply cannot afford to leave aside the possibilities of dialectical understanding yet. So, in the

1960s, some important elements of constructivism re-emerged in Soviet architecture, which was partly the result of an astonishing re-exporting from Czechoslovakia.

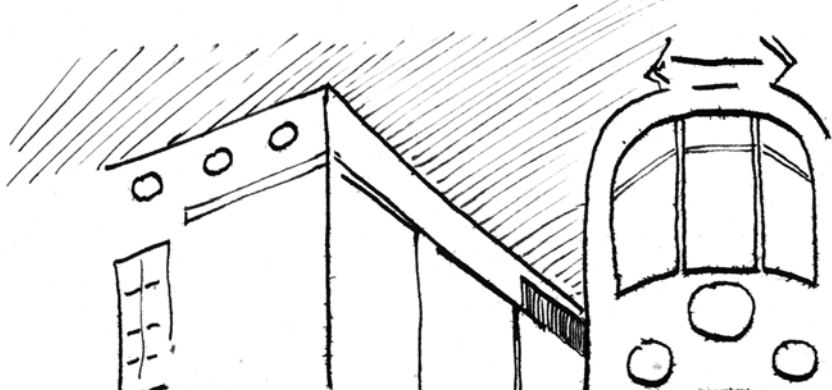
*-What does "re-exporting" mean?*

-Czech builders took over Soviet forms in the 1920s. After the war, Soviet builders reapplied them. Without Czech support, there would have been less continuity possible in revolutionary construction.

*-Why was there so much sympathy between Prague and Moscow until 1968?*

-For the Czech working-class, the love-affair started just in December 1920 with a major industrial uprising. Within hours, the seizure of factories and the desertion of entire army units seemed at hand. Telegraph communication received in Moscow reveal a nauseating sense of expectation. As with 1933 for the Cuban industrial uprising and 1925f in the urban Chinese south, and to a much lesser extent 1936 in Spain, nobody in official Moscow can really grasp the dimension. They know that even contact persons are missing to link to the hot-spots of revolt. They know that a lot of practical principles in the uprisings are more or less contradicting Moscow directives, but most important they sense that if this goes on, world revolution turns from a simple catch-phrase into a complex reality. As for the Czech workers' revolt of Christ-





mas 1920, they were rather late, really. In spring 1919, the social inertia produced by the Czech nationalist project had turned the region into a veritable missing link between Soviet Hungary, Soviet Slovakia and Soviet Bavaria.

Something else to be lost?

The Czech nationalist project suggested actually quite successfully, that there was something more than chains to be lost together with Czech capitalism. Like the Italian North colonising the South of the peninsula, there was a railway system and a distinct gradient of proto-industrialisation to be exploited along Czech nationalist policies in the new Czechoslovakian Republic. This bias of industrialist supremacy to nationalist tones and its accompanying strictly anti-revolutionary counter-insurgency was a constant problem for mobilising, e.g. railway workshops in the backwaters of the Carpathian East. And yet, Czech nationalism and its project of reactionary industrial and police supremacy was in a way just a cheap remake of the privilege conserved earlier by the much hated Austrian Empire. The industrialised regions of Bohemia, Moravia and Upper Silesia had taken 3 centuries to grow into the demand structure between Ukrainian Ternopil and Italian Trieste. In the Austro-Hungarian

war economy, they made up roughly 60% of the overall industrial production of the Empire. The Wilson doctrine parachuted the promise of national bourgeois self-determination to the region. This implied submitting it under the domination of new terms for production, brutally dictated by the real winners of the war through their world market. Czech industry was not developed for world market competition. There were serious draw-backs and suffering ahead. Certainly, an American-style self-made man and crypto-fascist industrialist like Bat'a could strike profit from the ensuing economic depression. His shoe-making empire combined out-sourcing and de-qualification with a harsh personal fight against craftsmanship, unions and politicised workers. Industrious collective faculties on a unique scale with local concentration were at hand in the region, but no equivalent industrial development realised their skills. This structural crisis of Czech bourgeois nationalism remained unresolved throughout the inter-war period.

*—Is it resolved today?*

—No. Interestingly enough, only the Socialist Economic Community COMECON was able to take up the historic role of the Austro-Hungarian empire for industrial Bohemia and Moravia. It provided for a large space of supply-demand interaction protected from the destructive speculations and movements



of the Washington-dominated world market.

*-So, the striking Slavophile sentimentality in the Bohemian and Moravian working classes over decades had an underlying political economy which was both rational and visionary?*

-In the course of the 1920s, we see a complex net of working-class hegemony develop to cover nearly all aspects of workers' lives.

### The bee principle

Moscow archives have preserved detailed accounts how the communist consumer co-operative "Včela (The Bee)" outstripped its reformist Social Democrat counterparts. Other offspring of Comintern activities were equally thriving in Czechoslovakia compared to other regions of the former Austro-Hungarian empire: Krestintern - the peasants' International, Sportintern, red trade unions, a strong communist parliament fraction constantly forced to push for further empowerment of workers' committees, the communist youth international. Characteristically, the lively discussions and clashes between a strong Trotskyite opposition and centralist Moscow fractions 1925/1926 tear apart the youth movement in the capital, while it is head-on engaged in blocking recruits' trains to the east. Either side uses the successful agitation

among workers against a new war mobilisation. Protecting the Soviet Union, entering into partnership with Soviet working collectives and demanding extensive economic exchange is not enough though for some thousands of Czech workers in the 1920s. They move out of Czechoslovakia to found communes in the Soviet Union. One of the most spectacular projects characteristically bore the Esperanto name "Interhelpo". At a certain time it contributed to more than a fifth of the gross economic output manufactured in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. There were other major commune and agricultural projects with highly politicised Czech industrial workers scattering over the whole Soviet periphery. Internal reports of the Comintern lament, that these internationalists were wasting their industrial skills to build agricultural islands of progress within ignorant surroundings. In the end, these projects tended to assimilate to their neighbours' level of subsistence rather than the opposite. The fact that people were reluctant to return to Czechoslovakia nevertheless is characteristic of the prospects of poverty awaiting you in Bohemia and Moravia with just your industrial skills to be sold for a living.

Workers' control and worker's councils

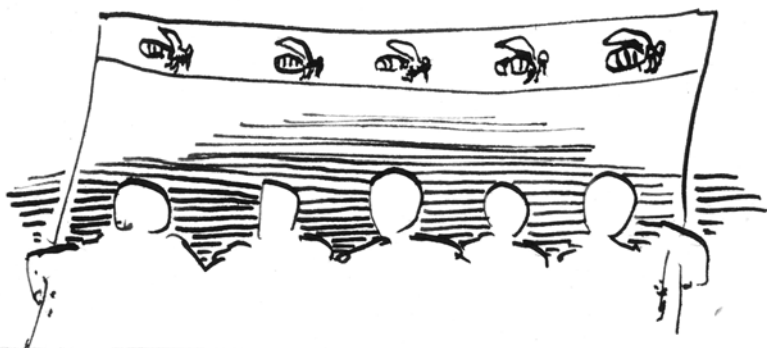
were an important



factor in realising working class interests throughout the inter-war period. In a characteristic attack on the communist parliament fraction, an interest group of left factory and workshop committees denounced in 1926, that "it is not understandable, that the communist Members of Parliament have proposed a renewal of legislation on workers councils which so clearly opposes the interests of the working class." Interest of the working class was obviously a home-grown understanding; it was at the heart of bottom-up party rationale. In many partnerships between Czech and Soviet working collectives, the western part asks twice, wondering how few factory committee members in the Socialist economy of 1926 and 1928 are actually communist party members. On the other hand, the Moscow-centred initiative to reorganise Comintern parties worldwide according to factory cells instead of neighbourhood cells meets reluctance and well-aimed obstruction on Czech shop-floors.

The Czech communist party administration itself had inherited serious elements of national conformism, though. It engaged in a series of convenient deals with the establishment from the old Social Democrat party. Though splitting off early, it was ready in many points to attain unity on the grounds of Social Democrat and effectively pro-

Capitalist positions. In the alliances and leadership-reshuffles accompanying the Moscow-led eviction of left activists after 1926 and 1928, this centrist right practice became stronger than in most neighbouring countries. Such practice became especially contested among working-class activists when the Red Trade Union membership was surrendered to Social Democrat organisations. The by then standard Comintern blow against independent class-oriented industrial activism was effected in Czechoslovakia 3 years later than in Germany. In 1928, the federal trade union representative Hais went through all the struggles for premises and membership preceded by neighbouring Red unions in the Netherlands, and Germany. After lengthy conflicts, a large proportion of unionised radical workers stood formally outside Comintern policies. Consequently, a strong regional co-operation between revolutionary unions in Germany (Industrie-Verbände), the Netherlands (NAS) and other countries (France, Belgium, USA, Spain) started to make sense for the old union administrators in the Prague-based hierarchy. By the end of 1928, an international conference of red non-Comintern unions was held at Prague. During the climax of fights to oust left elements from the party in 1926, Hais had rather kept a low profile, losing entire days at all-Czechoslovaki-

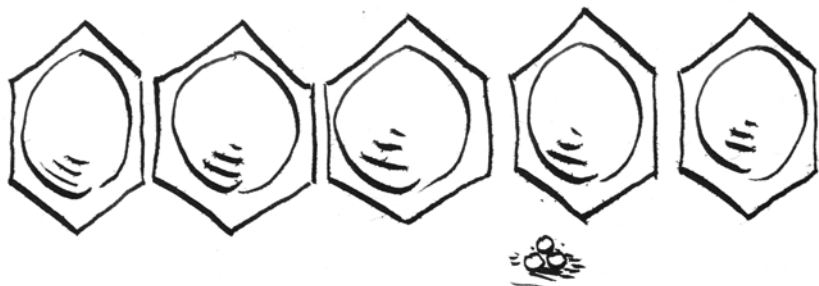


an trade-union conferences on, e.g. the question of which colour should be the monthly receipts for membership fees. This somehow characteristically Bohemian discussion was not entirely ephemeral though, for regional offices kept on dealing out their old stocks of bills without handing the income over to the centre, while the centre wanted to issue completely new colours and get in control of the whole trade union income. Characteristically, the relations between NAS and the Czechoslovak rebel trade unionists never developed as warmly as with the German partners. Perhaps, the successful Czech evolution of partial working class hegemony had the draw-back that people developed surprisingly little revolutionary initiative. Its structural abilities to decide about important aspects of public life, however, developed richer than in postwar Germany and the Netherlands.

Even the German fascist occupation and the subsequent exploitation of Czech industrial capacities for its war machine had to come to terms with the existence of workers' committees, workers co-operatives and working-class cultural premises. In a fascinating document, a former communist journalist, Reizin, reports in 1940 from occupied Prague working class neighbourhoods. According to him, the social outcome of this

constellation is highly contradictory. Superficially, submission and integration of the Czech workforce into the German war build-up functioned frightfully smoothly. There were, however, incidents of courageous sabotage, even open strikes which then provoked repression against tamed and docile official workers' councils.

Besides some very limited economic possibilities to negotiate, there was a rising sense of desperation throughout Czech society. Reizin was indeed well-acquainted with the everyday priorities of working class life: In the first place he could show that scarcity of food available for average working class families was provoking serious deficits already during the first year of German occupation. Only as a second step, he proceeded to analyse the general sense of despair in view of cultural suppression by the German authorities. Collaborating Czech institutions and organisations found themselves widely isolated and fostered serious rivalry between each other. According to Reizin, there was no general political sympathy for the Soviet Union among Prague and Kladno workers in 1940. He openly admitted that "the tide was against us" and he himself would not continue to organise politically after prolonged torture under Gestapo arrest. The rationale re-establishing the Soviet Union as



a serious perspective for future partnership was rather based on a sober understanding that in addition to all the hardship, the German occupation was likely to put an end to Czech Culture and working-class autonomy altogether. Simultaneously, the weakness of British and French claims for future assistance were not supported by their real performance at the negotiations of Munich 1938, and in their following military and political retreats.

*-There seems to be a striking absence of heroism, throughout this whole build-up of working-class power and its long-term back-sets.*

*-That's the sympathetic thrill of Czech working-class history, it seems basically alien and rather suspicious to all phenomenon of hero politics and hero worship.*

I do not really know how they later lose control of their factories. But I do know that they gain control with just this faculty of assuming comprehensive hegemony. Not making heroes saves a lot of energy for the real conflicts.

*-Dialectical materialists in the best sense?*

*-And advocates of a rather poor diet. My Cuban friend Fabio Grobart Sunshine<sup>c38</sup>, who has studied Economics in Socialist Prague, maintained though, that their diet had greatly improved due to Socialist progress. He marvelled, that in the end it*

included even notable fractions of vegetables besides the obligatory white flour with water.

*-You have chosen to sketch the Czech case in much more general terms than the Har'kov story, much less personal than our Moscow case study. Normally, we would expect at least some social statistics to underpin your judgments. What about a statistical proof, that the Czech working class suffers from a boring diet.*

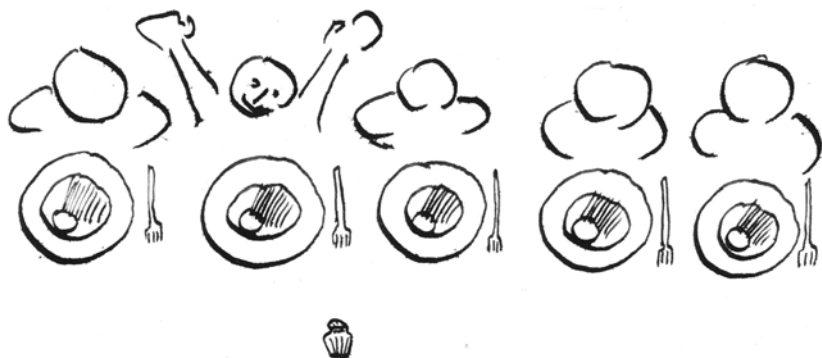
*-Churchill counselled to believe only in those statistics you have manipulated yourself. He was indeed a very experienced class-warrior - on the ruling side, that is. He had personally co-organised the Allied sponsoring of Har'kov's anti-workers regime in 1919. As for people eating, there is no average boredom.*

When the Czech-Cuban trespasser Fabio Grobart's recalls the modest dynamics of Prague working class meals, he illustrates the possibilities characteristic to the Cuban perspective. It's more than just a distance in space, there is a Latin American eclecticism at work which enables to combine 19th-, 20th- and 21st-century rationale.

*-Give us an example!*

*-I had brought over protocols of factory committees in 1945 from Czech archives to Havana. Fabio immediately started reading them passionately. He himself had just returned from field studies on Argentinian factories working under self-management "sin padrón (factories without*





a boss, FSP)". His eyes were gleaming. "These texts remind me of the first movements of bourgeois agents and capital in medieval Italy," he marvelled and explained his analogy. "Both hardly knew that they are the avant-garde of a social principle taking hold of global relations in the centuries to come. Martin, here, we have the first signs of a movement of real working-class power, not meditated, not represented, direct and able to sustain lengthy defensive action." In Europe, most academic historians say my research can have no positive, i.e. academic, result because its perspectives are too large. Suddenly, in Cuba, I felt that maybe my perspectives have been just too narrow to understand the significance of what I had been reading. Maybe, the mechanics of political organisation and costly heroic mobilisation have just superseded this shift of power and control to working classes in the 20th century temporarily. Perhaps, these pioneer steps tell us something about the possible nature of enormous breakthroughs in the future. Maybe indeed, the Czech working classes of 1945 have been as courageous and persistent in making a point to their movement as the first companies of money-lenders and fraudulent traders between Milan and Florence in the 14th century. The development of human faculty is complicated and contradictory. Long-term

set-backs are no surprise.

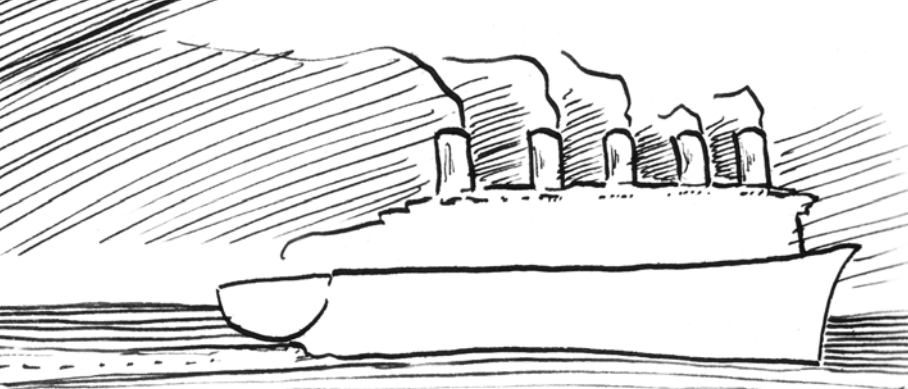
*-But why did the executive secretary of the Cuban communist party in the 1960s send his son to study Economics in Prague?*

-Actually, he and his counterpart in the Cuban trade unions, Lazaro Peña, spent important years of their exile from Cuba working for the renewed red trade union international in the Czechoslovakian capital.

The Cuban Kaleidoscope, shaking the old world –mixing anew

Most social relations in Cuba clearly bear the mark of having been remodelled on the basis of individual migration experience. No matter how individualising it is to leave old life for the New World, on the archipelago of Cuba these splinters associate again. In the subtropical setting, we get a kaleidoscope vision of many things we know. They entangle in combinations we would not have dared to dream about though.

Let us follow three characters on their way to Cuba: the Polish Jew and communist Abraham (Fabio) Grobart, born 1905, father to our far-sighted economist so fluent in Czech affairs. Abraham arrived at Havana in conditions of extreme poverty in 1924. Vladimir Majakovskij, travelling first class to underline what a Soviet poet is up to, arrived in 1925 to stay for some hours only. He then

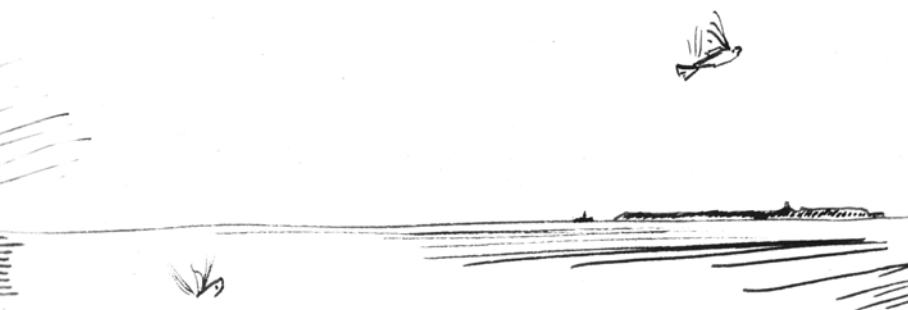


boarded for the United States, flabbergasted by the racism of its adjacent Caribbean backwaters. And thus we cross the thrilling path of Alberto Bayo a Spanish anarchist officer fighting a partisan war in the rear of Fascist Armies, a strategic novelty in the 20th century. He arrived in Cuba after the break-down of the Spanish Republic in 1939. Bayo founded a school of mathematics in Havana, working in a collective with most progressive innovators of pedagogics from the urban anarchist culture of revolutionary Barcelona. It took them some months to realise that there was not the slightest economic niche in Cuba those days to allow them to continue their collective dream brought over from drowning Spain.

At that time, Cuban public life was inflationary boasting with revolutionary intelligence from the former colonial mainland. Even the president, installed and sustained by the army general and later dictator Batista had his speeches ghost-written by a Spanish Republican émigré. Socialists paraded the streets of Havana as if they were already their own. Enforcing a constitution resembling Buharin's achievement for the Soviet Union, they initiated the beginnings of a general public health system designated for workers. They boosted the Cuban anarchist press and witty magazines with fruits of their experience

on how to become the focus of global progressive visions and volunteering. After some time, most of them had left Cuba for better prospects. They continued to move on to seemingly more responsive émigré resorts in Argentina and Mexico. 15 years later, Alberto Bayo was a furniture manufacturer across the Gulf of Mexico writing amateurish poems on the evilness of the Soviet Union. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had to use all their wits to convince him to give them some lessons on guerrilla warfare from his Spanish experience. He agreed reluctantly. It sounded too much like wishful thinking to win the lost Spanish fight right in Cuba two decades later.

Of all three, the most ardent assimilate in Cuban life itself was doubtlessly Abraham Grobart. He simply could not afford to move onwards once stranded in Havana. And by this genuinely proletarian bad-luck, he becomes a veritable treasure character for our book: an activist who links up all the settings of class conflict we have taken to review within his own life line: early Soviet experience, Czech working class power, and the Cuban success story. As a 19-year old, searched by Polish military police, he hoped to get to Canada but could make it no further than Cuba. A youngster from a genuinely destitute proletarian background in Belostok,

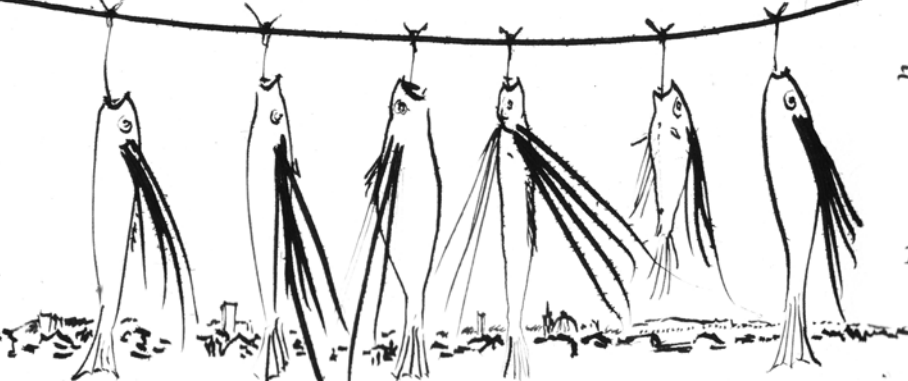


he had run into a most unfortunate political situation at home. With some friends he had glued communist leaflets around a Polish imperial army base, just across the border, some 60 km from where Erich Wollenberg was simultaneously trying to agitate soldiers on the German side with slightly better luck. A military police patrol beat up the night collective. Abraham Grobart escaped martial arrest with extreme difficulty; his comrades under custody could betray him at any time. In counter-revolutionary Poland, you got unreasonably long prison sentences with a much more modest charge record than Wolle had in Germany.

Poland was pampered by the allied forces as the major front state to Soviet Russia. In the shadow of this special mission, it could even risk to annex major parts and the capital of its neighbour Lithuania. Nobody cared about Wilson's declaration of the right for self-determination. Democratic and legal norms were not applicable to class war as it was waged by the new Polish rulers. People with experience in the communist underground estimated that even a death sentence was in stall for Abraham if the police search for him went on successfully. For some weeks Grobart was hiding in Jewish neighbourhoods of Grodno, now in Belarus. The sense of panic and isolation he fell into continues right through-

out his first weeks and months in Cuba. Majakovskij could just walk from deck onto the streets of Havana, making a nice pencil drawing on the way, which is now exposed in his Moscow museum along with a bottle of whiskey. To the contrary, Grobart was a third class passenger, so he had to undergo tedious sanitary quarantine for several days, before he could even set foot on the island he had never really wanted to see. Grobart had communist party membership but no cash. Majakovskij had sufficient cash but no party membership. Contemporary workers tended to resent every single one of these 4 details to their travelling comrades. Interestingly though, none of the four really proved dysfunctional for the advancement of their interests as a global class in the long run.

On the very day of landing in Cuba, Grobart had to start selling his labour in garment sweatshops under the most dismal conditions. The only consolation was that nearly everybody there would speak Yiddish. After some weeks, toiling and sleeping all the time in the same place, his skin rebelled viciously. He had no proper place to wash and was completely unacquainted with the subtropical climate. What seems paradise for a million European tourists every year now, was simply hell for Abraham Grobart in 1924 - the banal hell of a capitalist periphery.



The proper destiny for flying fish?

He decided not to socialise exclusively with his Polish-Jewish workmates, who kept up the Eastern European ghetto talk and their obligatory black dress against the heat of life in the Cuban capital. He managed to find his way up in the newly founded Cuban communist party. At that time, it was a tiny sect compared to the vast anarcho-Syndicalist movement shaking the country. Just in this period, this movement was being crushed with unbelievable bloodshed by the US-marionette dictator Gerardo Machado.

*-What made Abraham stick to the affiliation of the old world then?*

*-Maybe a rare experience of seeing more than just promise when he was 15. Back in the summer weeks of 1920, Grobart had witnessed how his home town Belostok changed into a working-class city during a spectacular Soviet Army advance. It even became home to a provisional Polish Soviet government for some weeks.*

An official biography written by a Cuban star writer in the end of the 80s and never published, alleges that Abraham Grobart was deeply impressed by the songs of the Red Army recruits he met. His family in Cuba still recalls a slightly different origin of his sympathies though. Acquainted with the art of surviving in his Jewish township after 4 years of

a hunger regime under German and Polish occupation, Abraham Grobart had used the temporary confusion to steal a sack of potatoes. The Soviet Soldiers who discovered his fraud let him go. This, rather than their songs, is likely to have made a difference, a new impression of possible class relations between armed and unarmed robbers of the rich. *-As for the sack of potatoes, we can say that by the 1960s with the deputy secretary Grobart succeeding to integrate Fidel Castro and his affiliates into the Cuban communist party, the investment had clearly yielded some return to Soviet power.*

*-Like many climbers from his sort of background, Grobart became a party soldier of a loyalty and firmness slightly awkward to contemporary Western observers. As soon as 1925 he oversaw anti-summit action in Havana. During a pan-American meeting of presidents in the Cuban Capital, the communist party dealt out anti-Capitalist leaflets in the street. Grobart sat in a hiding place in the very centre to check whether the young boys distributing the highly dangerous material came back from their mission. At the end of the day, a young Polish Jew and another terribly young Chinese comrade were missing. The party activated its civil affiliates to supply them with food and legal assistance in their arrest. They were held in custody in the fortress overseeing the town of Havana*



and the entrance to its harbour bay, one of the last strongholds of US-rule over the island taken only on 8th of January 1959 by a unit close to Che Guevara.

-Wow.

-Imagine, they had not slept properly for an entire week of street fighting, but they made it. In 1925, the two youngsters quickly disappeared from this fortress into the sea. Party contacts would later retrieve the arm of one of them from the stomach of a shark caught by fishermen. The ring on it was about all he had possessed.

-Who can possibly support the stress of street-fighting without proper sleep for one week?

-Sugar cane cutters can. Under the regime of capitalist sugar plantations, they had to make their living within some months of incredibly intensive piece rate work. Then, their families tried to survive the dead season on the harvest's earnings. I found one of them at the former Central "Soledad de la Muerte" ("the loneliness of death") near Cienfuegos.

-A revolutionary hero?

-Rather part of a working collective, carefully monitoring both world market and guerrilla movements.

-Looks like your last story?

-Difficult to top, indeed. But we will try further.

-How did they monitor world markets, then, when they were hardly able to survive on their seasonal sweat-work and not even allowed

*to enter the heart of the US-owned sugar plantation because of the colour of their skin?*

-Loading took place in the dead season. In the harbour of Cienfuegos, freight ships from Japan and Europe took up the fruit of their labour, sugar in spine-wreckingly heavy sacks. Demand was rising unprecedentedly, as Western Workers temporarily negotiated a share in the sweet cake of Capitalist affluence.

*-You mean, they lost their teeth when being dealt some cheap Ford-ist fluff?*

-Dealing out sweet dreams was the price to win over their collaboration in the cold war effort. Later, once the Eastern block showed weakness, the way was paved to crush unionising.

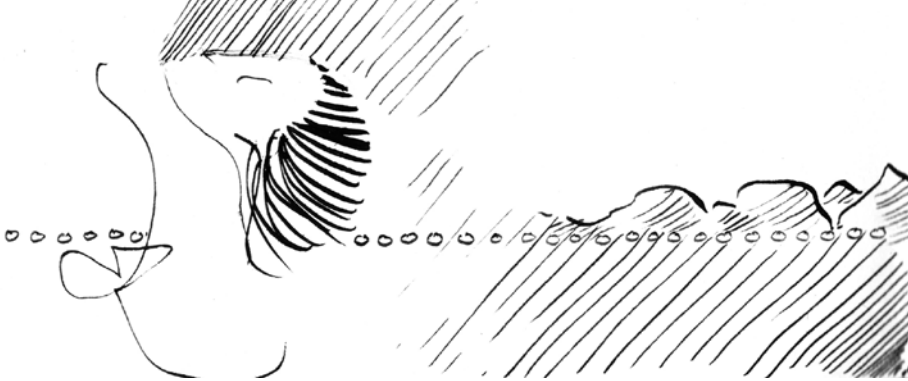
*-And Cuban toilers saw their chance of bargaining in-between?*

-At the time of the Cuban Revolution 90% of the export income was realised with sugar. Only some years later, European and US Agricultural Policy established a command on supply, throwing in their subsidised sugar beet able to crash the world-wide sugar markets and keep suppliers at their mercy.

*-Why did the ships load sacks of sugar? Mechanised granulate loading was technically ready to take over work in Cuban ports in the early 1950s already.*

-There were nation-wide strikes to prevent exactly that from happening in 1952 and 1953. Port workers were so successfully backed up by plantation and





railway workers that the rationalisation step was aborted for the entire Cuban sugar economy. Only in the 1970s the Socialist port of Cienfuegos started to load mechanically.

*-So, a brilliant strike movement mainly achieved that port workers could ruin their spines for another generation? Isn't that extremely retro-guard, like an old style craftsmen union?*

-It was a first step to keep up options for further industrial action at the strategic easel of Cuban ports. Obviously, workers were rather concerned about the spine of their very class movement at that time – a choice based on experience.

With industrial action in the full swing, Batista saw no other means than to reinstall his dictatorship of 1933 in 1953 in a more bloody remake.

*-And the fabulously progressive 1940 constitution?*

-Was as useless for the working class under military siege as Buharin's 1935 constitution for the Soviet Union in 1937 at the height of arbitrary political repression.

*-Why such a bloody dictatorship just 90 sea miles distance from the United States?*

-During the last months of Batista rule, the US administration was pressured to ask questions of this type. They actually stopped direct military aid. Just the British colonial power of neighbouring Jamaica continued to deliver high-profile equip-

ment, military helicopters and expertise.

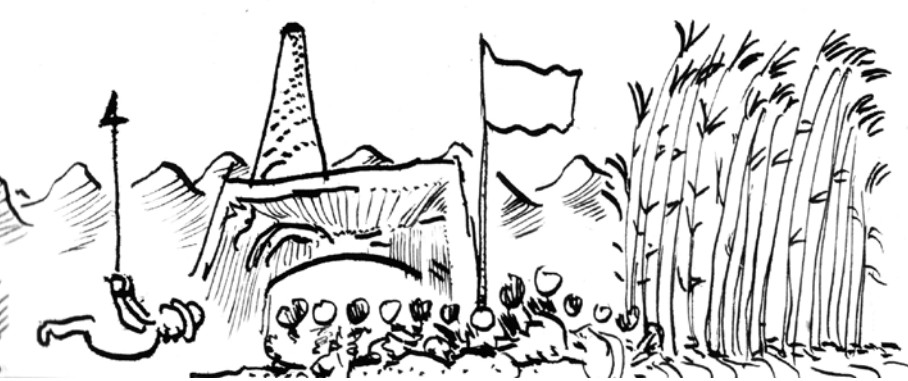
*-At the height of the strikes in 1953, there was no nationalist card to be played as among Czech rail road employees in 1920?*

-Earlier, in the Cuban social uprising of 1933, there was a big campaign by Machado to oust Spanish migrants from work who had no Cuban passport. It was bitter needed at that time. Some sugar factories, the so-called "Centrales" had mounted red flags and declared themselves "Soviets". They dealt out the plantation resources and land according to need. Observers in distant Moscow would neither understand why this movement was so strong, nor why it ignored Moscow directives and political guidelines so obstinately. More important for local collectives was that Cuban government paramilitaries could not enter some areas for months to start counter-insurgency.

*-So anarcho-socialist Cuba preceded Spain in the 1930s?*

-The Commune of Oviedo back in the former colonial motherland, developed pretty much simultaneously. According to latest activists' research in Spain, the breakthrough throughout the Hispanic world at that time was ignited by the unprecedented fact that communists and anarchists could unite in action.

If you have had the chance to experience the dynamics of social life in a Gallego workers



bar in Havana and in Galicia back in Spain you understand that in 1933, there were just some 6000 km of Atlantic waters, just 10 days by boat to separate their simultaneous revolutionary learning processes.

*-What did our sugar cutter from "the loneliness of death" do to monitor guerrilla movements, then?*

-Again, at first, it was neither him, nor the Cuban communist party who were able to understand the possibilities and needs of the guerrilla fighters in the mountains of Cuba 1956-1958. At daytime, the US-sugar plantation was a carefully patrolled battlefield. Labour was rendered according to the rules of the market and the military dictatorship. At night, however, delegates from an armed students group and later those of Che Guevara's units entered the most sensitive zones of colonial power underneath the mountain range of the Escambray. In the Central Soledad, people were gathering revolutionary taxes under cover and handed them over to their nightly guests from the mountains.

*-If we interpret this pencil protocol from an illegal factory collective meeting in Santiago de Cuba correctly, even Fidel Castro was not able to grasp the chances to develop guerrilla dynamics in the country before landing in November 1956 as fully as ordinary workers' collectives. At that time he still hoped and planned for a*

*successful urban guerrilla uprising in Santiago and other cities. Months before this plan spectacularly failed, the factory collective had already envisaged an emergency exit (c26). In their discussions, they explicitly considered a Chinese way of rural subversion. Advocating dispersal into the countryside, they planned to build temporary free zones with the help of peasants sympathising with land reform.*

-Castro was still training with Alberto Bayo in Mexico at that time. The factory collective we know about had developed a more feasible strategy than the guerrilla fighters in their military course. The newcomers from Mexico were quick though to grasp the value of this enlightened local assessment. Actually, within hours of landing in Cuba, they learnt from the experience of local, highly competent collectives, i.e. precisely not to seek a classic urban working class upheaval.

*-Why does the Cuban revolutionary commemorative sermon always stress the supreme command of Castro, the Máximo leader?*

-Maybe that is the Cuban way of expressing working class understatement. At least during the first years, they praise his high command instead of committing a lack of modesty and speak about the real popular high command.

*-This is irresponsible; everybody knows that such a detour out*



*of modesty will be forgotten in the following generation. But, there seems to be a more serious problem with charismatic leadership. Take the more privileged and eminently strategic printing industry of Havana in 1959. We can clearly see two fractions emerge among the workforce claiming to have a mandate from workers' self-management. There is a right and a left wing (some prominent derechistas on c26, c27). Both are virtuously employing revolutionary phraseology. They have access to the most sophisticated printing machines in the country. They use all the technical arsenal at their disposal to back-step their opponents in the name of revolution. But this does not seem enough to settle their conflict of interest. They start training units among the mass of workers, which is armed at that moment throughout the country. There is some serious intimidation and shooting at the printing workshops. In the end, a printing workers' meeting in a Havana theatre risks becoming the site of a veritable show-down. At that moment, Fidel Castro enters the stage and proposes a fusion of the major printing workshops of formerly liberal and conservative newspapers into a united "Emprenta Nacional". He wins overall support. Instead of a show-down, we have a show-master of revolutionary continuity.*

*-Cubans have been extremely lucky with this specific show-master. Still today, some have*

*the newspaper format editions of Socialist classics and Russian literature in their library, which were edited by the Emprenta Nacional in the following months.*

*-Abraham (Fabio) Grobart was not so lucky. In the early 1990s, he had to leave politics, maybe because he protested against the death penalty.*

*-He had grown up in the intellectual tradition of Socialist Humanism. The discussion groups of the Jewish Bund proved stronger in the end, than the military logic of attack and defence exercised by the Polish communist party cells in the underground he joined later.*

*-When the Soviet Union was dismantled, Cuban Generals returned from the Angolan battlefield. Formally, they had won, they had forced down the Apartheid state of South Africa. But their Cuban troops were demoralised by hard drugs, HIV-infection and exasperation. Revolutionary war is an extremely tiresome and corrupting enterprise. These Generals were demanding a Russian-style perestrojka.*

*-They were about to get Cuba on the Albanian road of development.*

*-They were executed.*

*A loss to the revolutionary movement. In the following, many papers and documents of Fabio Grobart were left standing in the rain in the splendid colonial patios of the Havana party archive. Major parts of his story disappeared*



*from the official revolutionary museum. His biography could not appear any more.*

-He was not really satisfied with the book anyway. In an angry remark, he wrote on the manuscript of his Cuban colleague:

*"this material should not be given out to the population!"*

*-How did you get it then?*

-A bank nearby the party archive has two counters; one has

"firms" written over it, the other "población (population)".

*-And what did our sugar cane cutter do after having liberated Havana?*

-He returned home.

*-Why?*

-Sugar harvesting had begun.

*-He was not interested in politics?*

-Actually, he participated in the most important political development of the following months.

*-In the province, not in Havana?*

-Exactly, on the periphery of the US-plantation, a first piece of land got nationalised. Such action uncompromisingly made the USA an enemy of the Cuban revolution.

*-And Fidel Castro a communist?*

-In their collective, only his brother Raul, Che Guevara and Camillo Cienfuegos were outspoken anti-capitalists before the split with the USA. Camillo Cienfuegos was an anarchist, actually.

*-The Cuban newspaper El libertario, publishing legally during the first two years after the revolution, claimed that prior to victory Castro relied on anarchist printers*

*to leaflet Havana with 50,000 illegal copies.*

-Camillo is actually much loved throughout Cuba until today.

*-He had to die early?*

-I have found nothing about that in his enemy's records.

*-Why are governing revolutionary representatives often so far from their people?*

-Because basically, people can care for themselves.

*-That's exactly what US-propaganda makes use of excessively.*

*Their most rewarding ally is private greed. They promise individual fulfilment and sell Capitalism.*

-We have to learn to care better.

*-Promise and sell better?*

-Let Capitalists from China specialise in that.

*-What can we do except promise individual fulfilment in life after Capitalism? Abstract collectivism is but a false tender.*

-We develop collective faculties here and now, strike and combine in the future, hit and ran in the past.

*-That is why you called these cute little stories a "revolutionary collective"? They ran around the globe to fail differently in every instance.*

- I really like only some of them, maybe we can do the trick remaining in one place. Please, try!

But anyway, our future should rather be a completely different story.

*-Do you think we might find it one day in our enemy's records?*

- I see no reason why to stop searching.



Proletarian clio brooding for revenge, September 2008.

This illustrated essay,  
*Revolutionary Collectives*,  
tries to relate and discuss insights  
from six years of archival research  
and interviewing in the former  
Soviet Union, the Czech Republic  
and Socialist Cuba. Readers with  
any degree of involvement in his-  
toric research or contemporary  
social movements are invited to  
read with us between the lines of  
hostile records on:

- a gay commune in Moscow  
1924 (page c5),
- workers' power in Har'kov  
1905-1922 (c17),
- early Soviet links with Czech  
industrial democracy  
1920-1945 (c31),  
and
- Cuban council communism  
1933-1959 (c40).

The controversial collage has  
been compiled as part of a series  
documenting our debate for  
*radical democracy* in social action  
possibly making collective revo-  
lutionary production a reality of  
our future.

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